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REALMS OF FANTASY

COVER: Spanish artist Luis Royo's warrior woman "Raven" returns to the cover of *Realms of Fantasy*. **ABOVE:** British fantasy artist gained recognition for his work with Brian Froud on the book *Faeries*. Terri Windling profiles the artist in this issue's Gallery, beginning on page 66.

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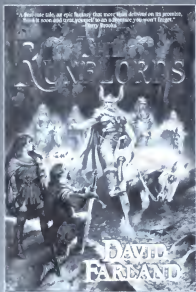
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This Week's Headlines: Space Aliens Evicted From Bookstores, Unicorns Invade.

SOME OF YOU MAY ALREADY KNOW A sinister truth about me—I lead a double life. In my everyday identity, I'm a wife and mother who, in her spare time between baking cookies and tending her garden, edits a bi-monthly fantasy magazine for Sovereign Media. In my other life, however, I'm a literary agent with one of the largest and busiest literary agencies in New York. In my professional agent identity, I represent authors to publishers, negotiate advances, royalties, foreign sales, movie deals and other assorted notarious activities. The reason I'm revealing this shocking truth to you today is that my two lives have overlapped to some extent, and I feel I must exploit one life in order to help the other.

How can this be, the troubled nation asks? Well, let me start at the beginning. Once upon a time, readers, there was no such thing as fantasy literature. There—now you know the awful truth. Until Del Rey Books, in the mid-sixties, I believe, published J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, fantasy as a genre did not exist. There were no unicorns, no magic swords, no elves or evil mages. What did exist was science fiction—there were space ships, and aliens, and travel to exotic worlds, and adventure and ray guns. Today, or course, things have changed. Where once cheezy paperback covers showed flying saucers and bosomy babes in spacesuits, they now show unicorns and

bosomy babes in brass bras. Science fiction as a genre is tottering weakly toward the exit.

As a literary agent who represents a fair number of frustrated SF writers, I want to know WHY. As a wife and mother who in her spare time edits a bi-monthly fantasy magazine, I have the perfect opportunity to find out. Thus have my double lives at last crossed paths. Please give me feedback, o fantasy readers—what is it you like about fantasy? What keeps you coming back for book 17 of the latest fantasy series but keeps you miles away from a beautifully written novel that happens to take place on another planet, or on a colony ship or in the future? Is it the ongoing characters? The good vs. evil aspect of much fantasy? The bosomy babes in brass bras? Are SF novels today too much work? Do you hate cyberspace? Love leafy glades? What is it?

I'm quite serious in asking these questions, and your serious, thoughtful replies to them are greatly encouraged. The information you give me today might well help to shape the speculative landscape you find in your bookstore in the very near future.

Please send your replies to me at P.O. Box 527, Rumson, New Jersey, in envelopes clearly marked "Survey Reply." Or you can e-mail me at ShawnaM896@aol.com, again labeling your mail Survey Reply. I sincerely need and appreciate your input. ♪

Shawna McCarthy

REALMS OF FANTASY

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MARK HINTZ

Publisher

CARL A. GNAM, JR.

Editorial Director

SHAWNA MCCARTHY

Editor

CHRISTINA KRUG

Designer

DEBBIE MOLIS

PATRICIA A. ALLEN

LEANNE SEDDON-TROJAN

CAROLE R. PASCOE

Copy Editors

REBECCA MCCABE

Assistant Editor

Contributors:

Tanith Lee, Charles de Lint, J.K. Potter, Noreen Doyle, Terri Windling, Gahan Wilson, Nigel Suckling, Dan Persons, Judith Berman, Richard Parks, S.N. Dyer, M.C. Summer, Mary O'Keefe Young, Carol Heyer, Annie Lunsford, Web Bryant, Paul Salmon, Ken Granning, Stephen Johnson, Tom Canty, Jane Yolen, John Berkey

DIANE BONIFANTI

Business Manager

KELLY KING

Circulation Consultant

AMANDA SMITH

Finance & Circulation Manager

CARI WYNNE

Production Assistant

ALI LORRAINE

Production Assistant

STEVE DORBOWSKI

Circulation Manager

WARNER PUBLISHER SERVICES

International Distribution

Newsstand Consultant

ARTHUR O'HARE

Advertising Offices:

JOE VARDIA

Advertising Director

NIKKI ANDERSON

Advertising Assistant

11305 Sunset Hills Road, Reston, VA 20190

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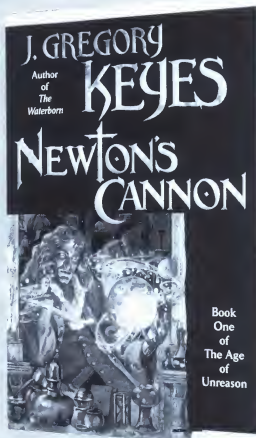
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- b) Set off a war between Louis XIV of France and George I of England.
- c) Create the most devastating weapon the 17th century has ever seen.
- d) Join forces with Ben Franklin in a battle between men of science and creatures of sorcery.
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Dear Realms:

I only recently came across a few issues of your interesting magazine, which I think contains many inspiring and beautiful pictures and stories. Yet there is one thing that disturbs me. The authors of your short stories certainly appear to be inspired by fantasy, ancient mythology, and creatures of other worlds. Yet I have seen several imaginative stories that were "infected" with the Judaeo-Christian duality. The narrow concept of "good" against "evil," which the dualistic-thinking Christians came up with, has no place really in imaginative tales influenced by mythology. Mythology is Nature and her forces clad in fanciful disguise. The people of ancient pagan societies, and today's natural tribes, did not acknowledge the Christian term of "Evil." They believed in a balance between Nature's elements. A harmony between light and dark, positive and negative, male and female, etc. All forces are around and within us, and nothing is really either good or bad. Life is not that simple. This idea of "Evil" the Christians always talk about is merely used to describe the human's natural instincts, desires, and supernatural occurrences.

So what about "evil" witches and magicians? Witches in ancient times were called the "wise ones" and they were dedicated to the secrets of Nature. They were respected individuals and considered to be blessed with the "gift of the gods." Magical practice in pagan societies is generally considered a natural craft, not an "evil performance." Even though not every person was a recognized magician, everyone was one way or another working magic. Magic can be used for all purposes and is neither "black" or "white."

So writers, if you write about elves, magicians, dragons, and heroes, don't let Christian duality infect fantastic mythological tales and restrict your imagination!

Andrea M. Haugen
Norway

An interesting letter to be sure! However, I think that you are confusing a writer's desire to create conflict within a tale as the "Judaeo-Christian duality" you speak of. A short story must, at the very least, in any genre, have some sort of interaction that creates a tension, plot, resolution, and so forth. If every character, creature, and hero/heroine just floated along in the neutral manner that you are suggesting — well, where would the fun be? Where would the adventure be? Where would the story take us? A dragon without its fire? A witch without tormentors? A

crusade without a purpose? Love without hate? Also, it appears as though you are a new reader and might have missed a few stories along the way. We actively seek alternative, nontraditional fantasy as well as the more traditional tales. Perhaps you might look up a few back issues and see if you feel the same way. Look for works by Julie Stevens, K.D. Wentworth, and William F. Wu. Also watch for an upcoming piece by Constance Ash, "Flower Kiss," a contemporary West African fantasy.

Dear Shawna:

When asked why I read that "stuff," my reply is pure logic ... well as far as it goes logically. There are adventure, romance, mystery, and shoot 'em ups that take place in the past, present, or future. If they are about the past or present then there are very definite rules that apply to the structure and telling of the story. In science fiction and in fantasy such rules are suspended. If the writer wishes to apply a philosophical argument to an entire culture, and their success or failure they can do so. If the writer wishes to apply an abstract idea or principal — this can be done as well. I like that in a story. Or, to paraphrase Asimov, in fantasy you can do the same thing that other people do, just in more intelligent company.

R. Miller
Chio, MI

Dear Ms. McCarthy:

I would like to sing the praises of ROE, which keeps getting better and better! "The Horse from the Sea" by Kirsten M. Corby (June '97) was marvelous and I hope to see more of her work. And someone give Carol Heyer a hug — her art continues to astound me. I would also like to respond to two other letters if I may?

First, to T.L. Favors — I've found a kindred spirit! I too am a young, Black woman trying to join the ranks of SF and fantasy writers. Currently I am at work on an epic fantasy novel. It was shocking to hear that a creative writing professor would say that SF and fantasy is a "weak crutch of genre writing." Thank God I had a creative writing instructor who offered encouragement! Fantasy is one of the oldest forms of story. All cultures utilize legend and folklore to explain why they are and where they came from.

You have helped me to know that I am not alone. Just read as much as you can. And if it helps to know that I am here — perhaps you can pass some encouragement along to

the next writer who may feel discouraged.

Next to Cathy Davidson who says that "Stories can only be good if sex of any kind is kept out." Sex is a part of life. A story is an expression of life — right? I didn't hear any complaints about death scenes. What about birth scenes? Let's just take all the LIFE out of a story. Where would we be then? "The Title" and "The End" — that's where we would be. I prefer that the fiction I read offer all that life has to offer — love, hate, sex, birth, death and all the colors in-between.

Carmen Welsh
Miami, FL

Dear Ms. McCarthy:

Congratulations on a very successful year in *Realms of Fantasy*. It is a terrific magazine and I appreciate the diversity of the stories that you present us with. These are my personal favorites from the 1997 issues:

"The Horse from the Sea" by Kirsten M. Corby;

"Silver Apples" by Beverly Suarez-Beard;

"The Spiral Garden" by Louise Cooper;

"Bad Medicine" by Martha Wells;

"Lawnmower Moe" by William Eakin;

"Fade Out" by Marnie Winston-McCauley;

"A Dark Fire Burning from Within" by

Leslie What;

"The Trigger" by David Smeds;

"Fallen Angel" by Jane Yolen;

"Walter's Christmas Night Music" by

Susan Kroupa;

I really like the way the magazine is put together and I hope 1998 proves even more successful.

Sincerely,
Michael Samerdyke
Wise, VA

Dear Shawna McCarthy:

I am a huge fan of William Eakin. I especially enjoyed "Lawnmower Moe," and his other Redgunk stories. Thank you Mr. Eakin for making me remember why I love reading in the first place. That is, being at the mercy of a good storyteller is a wonderful place to be.

Karen Donovan-Keefe
Providence, R.I.

You'll find another story by William Eakin in this issue.

Your comments are welcome. Send them to: Letters to the Editor, *Realms of Fantasy*, P.O. Box 527, Rumson, NJ 07760. Or better yet, e-mail: s.mccarthy@genie.geis.com

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Vampires, ghosts, and wild creatures abound, but don't worry — it's mostly fiction.

THERE IS A FUNDAMENTAL DIFFICULTY LURKING IN THE CREATION AND MAINTENANCE OF fictitious vampires which, so far as I know, has never been discussed in the critical literature related to the field. Historically, in what we jokingly call "real life", the vampire largely has been a problem of peasants or the other lower classes: the fruit of mingled superstition and country boredom brewing in the thick skulls of ignorant rustics. The vampires of actual legend tended to be earthy, hearty types who sucked blood lustily, and probably noisily, from the necks of their near and dear ones and smacked their

The peasants came up with the notion of these vampires because, not unlike ourselves, they were loathe to admit that their crops were scanty and their livestock sickly because of their own poor husbandry skills, and were vindictive enough to thoroughly enjoy putting the blame for their mediocre handiwork on perfectly innocent bystanders.

The peasants of Western Europe elected witches to be the scapegoats for their shortcomings and huge multitudes of people who had somehow or other managed to displease their neighbors were horribly tortured, usually unto death. In Eastern Europe the bucolic populace was

comparatively kind enough to declare walking cadavers to be the cause of their misfortunes and astounding numbers of corpses of thoroughly dead people were dug up with awesome solemnity in order to be decapitated and/or burned and/or otherwise operationally mistreated.

With maybe a few Russian exceptions these peasant vampires never made it into print. The reason for this is probably unconscious snobbishness on the part of the literary establishment; the same sort of attitude which to this day makes otherwise reasonable people insist that any killer as spectacularly flamboyant and — let's face it — successful as Jack the Ripper has to be related to the Queen or at least upper-middle-class.

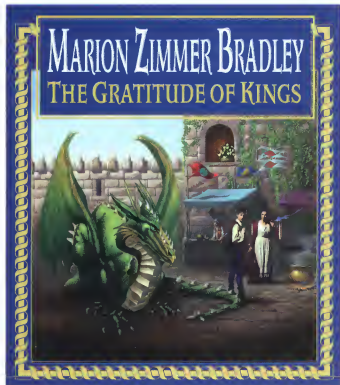
The seminal fictionalized vampire was created in 1816 by Byron's physician, John Polidori, during the same informal literary contest that inspired Mary Shelley to produce *Frankenstein*. Polidori's vampire was not in any way a peasant clumping about smelling of farm work and mumbling in some quaint country dialect; the good doctor's creation sprang unabashedly from the elegant Gothic mold of *Melmoth* and *The Monk* and was a gliding aristocrat with smooth hands and smoother diction. There cannot be a smidge of doubt Polidori's elegant menace was the direct inspiration for Bram Stoker to create a vampire who in life had been nothing less than a king!

Dracula is a marvelous idea that has spawned many another marvelous idea but — and here we come to the fundamental difficulty mentioned above — more and more one can see that authors following Stoker's lead have tended to drift away from the fact that Dracula was the undead continuation of what had been a terrifyingly powerful and vivid human.

You might say, as we drift in time farther and farther away from the original impact of *Dracula* authors have drifted into depicting vampires who, in life, were merely the dim, languid, distant offshoots of some originally formidable ancestor. Descendants, in the worst sense of the word. If you have met people, if you are people like that, you know that people like that tend to be very boring and vampires based on people like that tend to be even more boring, and there are far too many of these self-enraptured bloodsuckers these days nattering on about how no one understands them in far too many books that are far, far too thick.

Chelsea Quinn Yarbro's vampire, Count Saint-Ger-

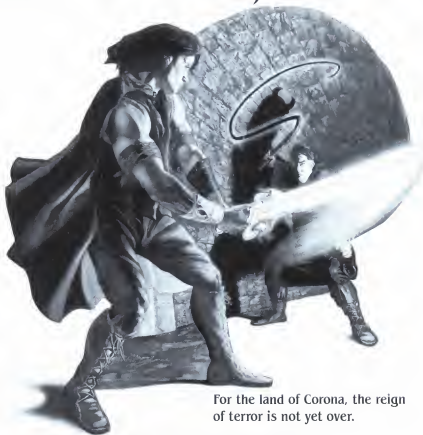
Though not a big book, *The Gratitude of Kings*, by Marion Zimmer Bradley has enough twists to fill a series.



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main, in *Blood Roses*, Tor Books, New York, \$24.95, totally avoids falling into all of that. He was not only the fabled *le Comte de Saint-Germain*, that highly public though shadowy figure whose mysterious, occult activities in the courts of Europe during the 1700s still provoke interesting scholarly disputes, before that he led a Hittite slave revolt against the Greeks; battled Assyrians as incarnated Imhotep; toured Britain with Julius Caesar; and was a scholar-translator for Charlemagne at Aix-le-Chappell.

In his early days as a vampire he had problems abstaining from the darker and appalling vices that ever tempt the undead, indeed he indulged them with such gusto that he was used as a semi-divine demon by the Babylonians to terrify the opposition and feed on enemy soldiers. With the passing of centuries he began to leave off such spectacular (and highly visible) cruelties and tended to moderate and render less noticeable his more unusual activities. Ms. Yarbro leads off an essay on her character with a quote from a letter written by the Prime Minister of England in 1749 concerning the historical Count, which still gives the reader a very satisfying little chill: "It is not surprising that the English can discover nothing of the true origins of Count Saint-Germain for England has no secret police. However the French can learn nothing of him, either, and they have the most efficient secret police in the world."

This movement from spectacular monster to unobtrusive survivor is typical of Yarbro's convincing touches in the development of her vampire. The basics were built in from *Hotel Transylvania*, her first novel about the Count published in 1978. They were noticeably well observed and well structured.

It's a damned good thing for the Count that his creator built him solidly and well since she's used him hard (always in a loving way, mind!) in novel after novel and short story after short story, hurling him headlong into the most challenging historical periods her formidable research can uncover, forcing him to outlive the most bizarre societies our perverse species has devised, and giving him no alternative to confronting and destroying the most evil and most stupid villains she can unearth from outcolorful past or just flat out make up. Yarbro, I think rightly, sees evil and stupidity as precisely the same thing observed from a slightly different angle.

What has happened to her Count is the same intriguing post-Faustian irony that sooner or later ends up facing all the best mages of myth, before and after Prospero, if they only manage to survive long enough. It doesn't matter if they learned their power for selfish motives from the beginning, or if they had kindly intentions at the start but were corrupted by the learning, the rules of fable decree that the exercise of their dangerous art eventually either destroys them or they somehow live through the inevitable backdraft and are thus taught humility, secondly empathy, and from then on find them-

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selves unable not to do what they can to help out poor old humanity and the occasional stray dog. It's one of the most encouraging archetypal magical formulas there is, and I certainly hope it's true.

All of the Saint-Germain stories, even the contemporary ones, are full of historical observation since Yarbro is not only hopelessly observant but is clearly a major burrower in obscure tomes and an obsessive tracker-downer of long-forgotten facts. Judging from the tone of the tales, her contemplation of the extended activities of our species has given her a rather hard view of humanity, and the greatest continuing problem her sadder but wiser mage has to face as he wanders on through era after era — be it ancient Egypt or the glory that was Rome or old Vienna—is the reliably unrelenting foolishness of mankind.

In *Blood Roses* Ms. Yarbro drops her Count spang into medieval Europe during the time when it was all being enthusiastically decimated by the black plague. As usual her meticulous research has seen to it that the book is crammed with ghastly facts described in harrowing detail. Rest assured that you will find yourself learning more than enough about this grimly colorful period to make you a proper menace to everybody's appetite at your next shared meal.

Of course these curious bits of information are not just heaved at you but are skillfully woven into the workings of the tale. For

example: during this period travel was always hugely problematic because of poor roads, lack of cooperation, and a tendency toward antagonism between the cities and states, and no particular law enforced in the wild spaces between them. In the course of the book we learn how the ravages of the plague not only introduced totally new problems but wildly exacerbated the old ones.

All this becomes a matter requiring serious study for the Count when he finds himself forced to relocate, which with an unaging alchemist/vampire is a perpetually recurring problem, needless to say. He reviews the interesting and often surprising occupations that tended to make movement easier, with us looking over his shoulder, and with typical audacity and perspicacity hits on the notion of becoming a troubadour. I found this to be an excellent example of how Yarbro can use an essential plot point to throw a whole new illumination on the time and place she has researched for her tale and is describing.

Another well-crafted book in a well-crafted series.

The bulk of excellent short stories in *One Day Closer to Death* by Bradley Denton; (St. Martin's Press, New York; 357 pp.; hardcover \$23.95) came out in an absurdly dinky edition (a mere four hundred copies) but that didn't stop the collection from winning the World Fantasy Award in 1995. I am glad to say that the clever folk at St. Martin's Press hit upon the notion of tying them in with a

new short story featuring Blackburn, thus intelligently evoking the name of his most famous and (one assumes) best-selling work so far and reissuing them in a run that had better be many times four hundred or someone at St. Martin's is in big trouble.

The book has a Foreword and each one of the stories has a little Introduction and — unlike my usual advice concerning such add-ons to anthologies — I strongly suggest you read them as they are all worth your time and will add considerably to your enjoyment of Mr. Denton's offerings.

The story introduced pretty much sets the tone for the collection which is, essentially, a passionate examination, story by story, of people who have to meet a test, to take a plunge or die, to evolve or turn into stone.

Technically *The Territory* is an interesting variant on the World Of If theme. Its hero, more or less in innocence, through a seeming lack of other choices and the confusions of circumstance, finds himself drifted among one of history's greatest monster crews: Quantrell's Raiders. The hero is none other than Sam Clemens. Intrigued? I hope so.

Skidmore is a sinister, nitty-gritty little gem involving the spooky and yucky remnant of Ken Rex McElroy. He, too, is a historical figure and if the name doesn't jog an ominous bell in your head, he was the horrid bully who so terrified the citizens of a tiny Missouri town that they collectively reached the

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point where they couldn't find any other option than to shoot the son of a bitch dead in his fancy truck right there on the place's dismal main street. Forensics determined the bullets that tore into McElroy and his truck had come from several rifles, but though the event took place in broad daylight with most everyone there to see it happen, the police never did find anyone, not a single soul, who would admit to having seen a shooter.

And, now in Denton's story, Ken Rex McElroy's back...

My two favorites among these really first-rate works are *Killing Weeds* and *Captain Coyote's Last Hunt*. The first is both a powerful ghost tale with political implications and an agonizing coming-of-age story. There have been very few political ghost stories, just off-hand I can only call to mind Robert Aickman's *The Houses of the Russians* and some Civil War experiments by Ambrose Bierce. I can't think why this is so because the combination is amazingly disturbing. *Killing Weeds* is about the stubbornly continuing survival of the Vietnam War among us all. Denton makes extremely subtle use of the lingering psychic damage this conflict caused and fuses the notions of post-traumatic stress syndrome and spooks in a bone-chilling manner I shall never manage to forget. Really a superb ghost story.

Captain Coyote's Last Hunt is another coming-of-age account, but this time with a badly chosen substitute father. It is also a highly effective, slam dunk attack on cruelty to animals and to the earth at large. On top of that it contains one of the best one lines I have ever read on coyotes. I love coyotes passionately, did so from the first time I saw one, but the intensity of my feeling for them has always puzzled me so my affection is interestingly tinged with mystery. Anyhow, here is the line describing the coyote:

"It was scrawny, and its fur was mottled and mangy, but it held itself as if it were perfect."

The rest of the story is good too. As is the whole book.

I always find myself approaching fantasy epics about animals with considerable caution because while they can be marvelous if well done—I mean look at *Wind in the Willows*—they can be nauseating in the extreme if poorly managed.

Not to worry, *The Wild Road* by Gabriel King (Del Rey, New York: 365 pp.; hardcover \$24.95) is comfortably within the well done category. It's an unabashed, freewheeling fantasy in the great Battle of Good against Evil tradition, the good being represented



mostly by courageous cats and the evil stoutly fought for by a weird scientist known as the Alchemist who wears a goggled mask and boots made of thick black rubber and stinks horribly of chemicals.

Our hero is a fine cat named Tag who is bought from a pet shop by a nice but dull human couple. He stays with long enough to grow from a kitten into a strapping young puss, then makes his break from regular canned food and warm rooms with soft sofas and is soon astonished to discover he is ill equipped to deal with the lack of these nice things.

Also there is a constant complication because of the impatient urgings of Majicou, a fine feline Candalf, a black, one-eyed, powerful and scary cat magus who will not stop insisting, both in dreams and in the flesh, that Tag fulfill his duty by locating the King and Queen of cats, nothing less, and see to it that they are both safely ensconced at Tintagel before the Equinox.

In the occasionally blundering and always freewheeling process of trying to carry out these instructions, Tag encounters a fine Dickensian multitude of characters, cats and otherwise.

Among the cats we have the sultry Sealink, a Cape Cod calico from the American Southlands who has seen it all and enjoyed every bit of it; her stalwart and occasionally menacing Cockney lover Mousbreath; the extremely loveable and whacky tabby Cy (for "Sign Here") and for "Cypher" among other things) who has a spark plug in her head, and when it glitters brass and diamond ghost moths fling themselves into the light streaming from her eyes in order to crackle and vanish. Most importantly in the cosmic scheme of things we have the very elegant, though now and then dim, Ragnar Gustafsson and Pettelot Fitzwilliam who are, respectively, the aforementioned King and Queen.

Among the lead players who are not cats we have a scrappy magpie named One For Sorrow, a resourceful fox named Love A Dustbin (since this book is to be printed in the USA I wonder if the editors will change that to Loves A Garbage Can ... bet they

Continued on page 85

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MERLIN'S CRYSTAL BALL

BY DAN PEREZ

Hudson Leick crosses swords with, and sometimes is *Xena: Warrior Princess*.

SHE'S BLONDE, BEAUTIFUL, AND OUT OF CONTROL, A VENGEFUL MORTAL-TURNED-GODDESS with a psycho smile and a taste for retribution. As the the baddest of bad girls, she's mesmerized a legion of fans who are busily constructing web pages and writing fan fiction in her honor. She's *Xena: Warrior Princess*'s arch enemy Callisto, of course, and when it comes to the actress who plays her, what's not to Leick?

"I think she's probably pretty split in a lot of ways," says Hudson Leick (rhymes with "pike") of her character on the phenomenally popular *Xena*. "Crazy—that's such a brutal, harsh term. She's

definitely got a little psychological problem going on, I think. Oh, God, I love playing her. She's angry and she wants something to make the pain stop. I don't think she goes out to try and create mayhem—it's weird how I see it—I see it differently. I mean, the goal is not to create mayhem; it's to find peace. And her idea of finding peace is if she harms this other person. If she pays back this other person, then it'll be OK. Or if she doesn't

work, it's fine to die. But dying doesn't seem to be happening for her. She just wants it to stop."

Heidi Hudson Leick, 28, was born in Cincinnati, Ohio and grew up in Rochester, New York, where she attended Brighton High School. She also worked as a model in Rochester and Tokyo before attending acting school in NYC; she is a graduate of the prestigious Neighborhood Playhouse. Her acting career includes

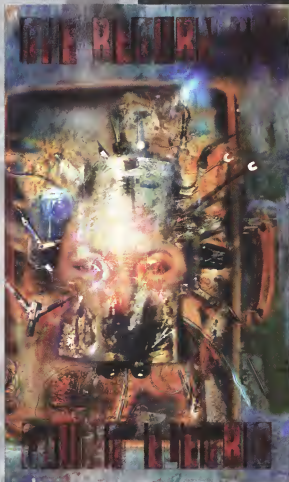
numerous guest appearances and a stint as Shelley Hanson on *Melrose Place*. She went on to a short-lived Aaron Spelling series called *University Hospital*, and then to appearances in the popular series *Touched By An Angel*. Then, in 1995, she landed the role of Callisto, and has appeared in both *Xena* and *Hercules: the Legendary Journeys*.

To get the role, she went for an audition. "It's great to get any part, really, because there are a lot of actors out there," she says. "I had seen *Hercules*, but I had never seen *Xena*, and I knew they didn't wear a lot of clothes. And so I decided to cover myself from head to foot. I don't know why I did that. I just didn't want to be like—a babe. A bimbo babe. And I did the part, and I was supposed to do a kick. There was supposed to be some action, I guess, but it didn't really seem to call for it in the scene, so I stayed really still and did something crazy. And they asked me if I was active at all. And I said 'Yeah. Oh, and I can ride horses!' And I could ... sort of. And they said 'That's good, because you wouldn't even get this audition if you couldn't ride a

Hudson Leick battles Xena and the forces of good in the popular syndicated television show.



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Gabrielle (Renee O'Connor) and Xena (Lucy Lawless) often have difficulty finding worthy opponents

horse.' And I thought, 'Oh, great. Brilliant.'"

Leick loves to tap into her darker side for the role of Callisto. "Absolutely! It's brilliant! It's so much fun. It's really therapeutic. And to get paid for it? To act out? It's gorgeous. It's almost like I feel that she comes through me, as if she's a part of me. It's not like it's a hard character for me to get to—it's probably the easiest character I've ever played. I think every human being has rage, or sorrow, or anger. It's a part of me."

Does Leick, who subbed as Xena for one episode after Lucy Lawless was injured in a riding accident prior to a *Tonight Show* appearance, prefer villainous roles? "I guess I prefer to play Callisto rather than Xena. Playing good roles, like when I played the angel [in *Touched by an Angel*] was difficult, because my idea of it is perfect, and that's where I go wrong. Because when you're bad, you can do no wrong. It doesn't matter what people think of you, and when you're trying to do good, you box yourself in. [I'm held to a higher standard], at least in my own mind. It messes you up, acting-wise."

Leick's physical preparation for the role included "three days of kung fu. That was all right." As for sword training, she says, "It's funny: they teach us our routines the day of—Literally. I'll get to the set and we'll have maybe two hours before we shoot the scene and the stuntee will come up to me and show me what to do. So it's not so structured. But I've been a god lately, so I haven't had to fight so much. That's not true—I did a lot of fighting on the *Hercules* that's coming up. I fight

with Ares a lot."

The principal challenges that Leick faces when performing Callisto are "technical things, or personal things—if I drop my lines I get very frustrated with myself. That's in any character I play, not just this. It's all outside things, it's not inside things. It's getting up in the winter, getting your whole body painted every day: that cold, thick orange paint. And I'm wearing a little outfit and carrying a big steel sword in the cold, in the rain. That's not high on my list," she says, laughing. "But I like working outside. I love New Zealand."

According to Leick, the best thing about playing Callisto is, "I get to do whatever I want whenever I want, and not only am I paid for it, I'm praised for it. I get to act out and I get to access something in me that's really dark and not socially acceptable."

The very first Callisto episode, entitled "Callisto," was left open-ended, but Leick didn't know at the time whether her character would return. "They told me that it was a possibility, that they'd see how the first show went, so I didn't know. I did know that when I sunk in the sand—I think that was the next one—I didn't think I'd be coming back. I remember buying Lucy and Renee and Ted small presents and books because I thought that was it and I wanted to tell them I appreciated working with them. It was not the end. Never the end, yet. I think she will end soon, though."

Leick is unsure whether she'd change anything about Callisto if she were able. "It's hard to say, really. It must be hard on the writers right now with Callisto, because

they've already made her immortal, and a god, and she's died so many times. It's hard to go places with her, which is why I think they're going to get rid of her. I mean, you don't want her to be all mushy—she's such a great character. So I don't really have any ideas about what else we can do with her. I've already done episodes that I can't tell you about. But there's really not much more to do with her, in my opinion. And I don't want to make her too light, because that would ruin it as well."

Leick has had a lot of freedom in helping develop the character. "Oh, I have so much freedom," she says. "We have read-throughs, and I didn't in the beginning, but now I think because I've developed her—I can't change whole scripts or anything, but I can change certain words. Words I think she wouldn't say or words I think she would say. Things like that."

Is there improvisation on the set? "Oh yeah," she says emphatically. "Not tons, but some. Because I'm working on *Seventh Heaven* right now, and I'm so used to working on *Xena* and *Herc* that *Seventh Heaven* is by rote. Like "is" and "the" and "these"—you have to get exactly the right words. Which is very hard. But it's not that way on *Xena*. However it comes out, they're like: 'OK! We're moving on.'"

Leick says that a lot of the chemistry between Callisto and Xena is chemistry between herself and Lucy Lawless. "It has



Leick as the evil Callisto finds that immortality can be rough.

to be. Absolutely. Even though we're playing characters we're still human beings. It's always that way with actors. You can get two great actors together in a love scene and you just don't buy it because they don't have chemistry. I think Lucy

and I play off each other very well. It's really cool."

A great scene in the episode "Return of Callisto" involved Xena punching Callisto, and Callisto simply smiles. Leick says that director T.J. Scott came up with the idea.



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"He was great. He was always very involved with my character and we'd come up with ideas together. Callisto really gets off, particularly at that point, with getting Xena's attention. And when Xena engages with Callisto, in a strange way she feels cared about. So when she's engaging with her and she smacks her, it's like a pleasure because first of all, I think Callisto could kick a lot of people's butts. And Xena is her equal and maybe a little bit more, and so it's a thrill."

In the episode "Ten Little Warlords" Leick played Xena, while Lucy Lawless was recovering from an injury. "It was interesting," Leick says, "it was difficult, frustrating. Renee [O'Connor] helped me out a lot with it, which was really nice of her. She would tell me how she would say it or she'd put her hand here or things like that, which helped a lot. And when I watched it, I didn't enjoy it. My body type is so different from hers, like the way I walk. And I remember walking and thinking, 'OK, I'm Lucy: I've got to walk like this.' And then when I watch it, it doesn't look a thing like her. Not a little bit. It was odd."

"I think most people I come into contact with say they liked it. I guess most people aren't going to tell me they hated it!" she goes on, laughing. "I'm sure there are people who didn't like it."

Much has been made of the show's enormous popularity with lesbians, and of the show's so-called "subtext." In regard to this, Leick says, "I think Callisto has sexual feelings toward Xena. Yeah, absolutely. She has a lot of feelings toward Xena, in many different realms. But I don't think that needs to be a focus, just because America's homophobic. It's just flirting, you know. It makes it a little more razor-sharp when you mix love and hate like that. They're both so powerful."

Leick notes that she is recognized "... randomly. Sometimes yeah, sometimes no. Usually I hear 'You know, you look just like that girl in Xena.'"

How does Leick respond to being recognized? "It depends on how I feel," she says. "I remember the first time it started happening I did *University Hospital*, and no one was really recognizing me—it wasn't a really popular show—and I was in a Sears, and this girl says, 'I think that's that girl from *University Hospital*!' I literally ran out of the store! I was so afraid, and I can't even tell you what I was afraid of. Having someone know what I was like, it felt like someone had been watching me. It was a very weird feeling. I don't get that much any more because I'm getting used to it."

With the impending doom of Callisto, does Leick have any plans for other roles? "I'd like my own [series]," she says. A spin-off? "No, not a spin-off. I don't think they can do anything like that with Callisto, just a new character. That would be cool." ♦

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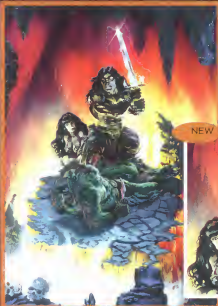
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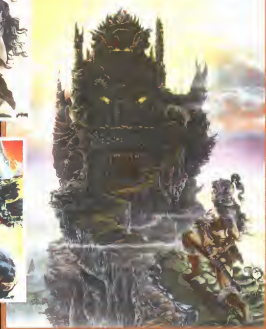
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A Winter's Tale: Solistice stories and other myths of nature

British artist Allen Lee has a keen interest in tales of the mythic landscape. Here he portrays the haunted countryside found in old Welsh legends.

ISIT HERE NOW AT WINTER SOLSTICE, THE MYTHIC DEATH OF THE YEAR AND THE SUN...although by the time these words see print the Winter King will have been reborn, the seasons turning from winter to spring. These winter months are a particularly potent time for storytelling and myth—indeed, in some cultures this is the *only* time when certain stories may be told, certain gods named, certain powers evoked. It is this connection between nature's cycles and stories which I wish to examine today—while outside, a dying sun bleeds crimson light onto the distant hills, and fires are lit all around the world to hasten the sun's resurrection.

In Brittany, the Celtic region of France, the season of story-telling begins in November, the Black Month of Toussaint, and goes on through the following Very Black Month, ending at Christmas. Likewise in England, traditional story-telling belongs to the cold winter months, when the harvest is in, the nights grow long, and work can be done by the light of the fire—the winter work of spinning and sewing, so entwined with the process of story-telling that in centuries past Mother Goose was commonly pictured with distaff in hand. In early America, some of the Puritan groups which forbade the “idle gossip” of story-telling relaxed these restraints at the dark of the year, from which comes a tradition of religious and “miracle” tales of a uniquely American stamp: Old World folk-tales transplanted to the New and given a thin Christian gloss. Among many of the Native American nations scattered across our continent, winter was, as is still, considered the appropriate time for story-telling, when long myth cycles are told, learned, and passed through the generations. Trickster stories are among the tales believed to hasten the coming of spring. Among many tribes, Coyote stories can only be told in the dark winter months; at any other time, such tales risk offending this trickster, or drawing his capricious attention.

In myth cycles to be found around the globe, the “death” of the year in winter was echoed by the death and rebirth of the Winter King (also called the Sun King, or Year King), a consort of the Great Goddess in one of her many local aspects (Cybele, Astarte, etc., representing the earth's fertility). The rebirth or resurrection of her consort (representing the sun, the sky or the winds) not only brought light back to the world, turning the seasons from winter to spring, but also marked a time of new beginnings, of spiritual innocence, cleansing the soul of sins and ills accumulated in the twelve months past—much as Christ, in the Christian mythos, undergoes ritual death and resurrection, redeeming the sins of mankind.

Solstice celebrations of the ancient world included the carnival revels of Roman “Saturnalia” (December 17–24); the Anglo-Saxon vigil of “The Night of the Mother” to renew the earth's fertility (December 24th); the “Yule” feasts of the Norse, honoring the One-Eyed God and the spirits of the dead (December 25); the Persian Mithric



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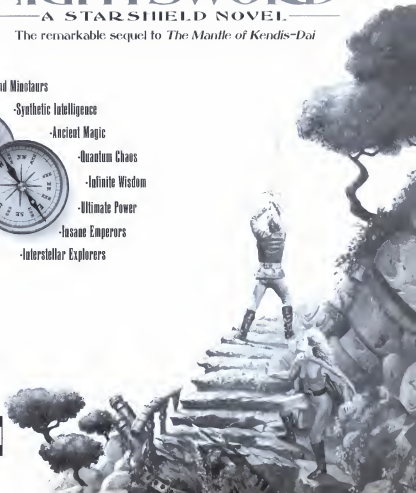
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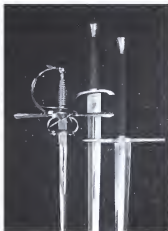
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festival called "The Birthday of the Unconquered Sun" (December 25th); and the Christian holiday Christmas, marking the birth of the Lord of Light (December 25th). In it interesting to note that many symbols we associate with Christmas today actually come from much older pagan ceremonies of the solstice season. Mistletoe, holly and ivy, for instance, were gathered in magical potency by moonlight on winter solstice eve, then used throughout the year in Celtic, Baltic and Germanic rites. The decoration of evergreen trees can be found in a number of older traditions: in rituals staged in decorated pine-groves (the *pinus silvea*) of the Great Goddess; in the Roman custom of dedicating a pine tree to Attis on solstice day; and in the candle-lit trees of Norse Yule celebrations, honoring Frey and Freyja in their aspects of Hunter, Huntress, and Protectors of Forests. The "yule log" is a direct descendant from Norse and Anglo-Saxon rites; caroling, pageantry, "mummers plays", eating plum puddings and exchanging gifts are all elements of solstice celebrations handed down from the pre-Christian world. Even the story of the virgin birth of a Divine, Heroic or Sacrificial Son is not a uniquely Christian legend, but one found in cultures all around the world—from the myths of Asia, Africa and old Europe to Native American tales. In ancient Syria, for instance, a feast on the 25th of December celebrated the Nativity of the Sun; at midnight the sun was born in the form of a child to the Virgin Queen of Heaven—an aspect of the goddess Astarte.

The Christian gospels do not give a date of birth for Jesus of Nazareth; and the early church had no such holiday in its calendar. In the 4th century several different days from December through March were proposed for Christ's birth; in the 5th century most countries of the West agreed to adopt December 25th (although this was resisted in Jerusalem itself for two centuries more.) It is no accident that this is also winter solstice (in the Julian calendar), and thus a date that had long been celebrated as a holiday. Despite the Christianization of Europe (aided by laws which made it a crime to worship in any other manner; Charlemagne alone massacred thirty thousand Saxons who staunchly refused to convert), many people continued to quietly practice their own indigenous tribal religions—sometimes openly, sometimes secretly, depending on the laws of each region. Finding it impossible to completely eradicate older religious beliefs, the priests of the new church changed tactics—taking over popular sacred sites, festivals, and even the gods themselves (converting the Irish goddess Brigit into Saint Brigit, for example.) Thus churches were built in the old sacred groves, mythic tales were re-fashioned as stories of the saints, and rites once attached to the land underfoot and the winter sun as it passed overhead now honored the birth

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of a child born under the stars of Jerusalem. (For many centuries certain factions in the church—both Catholic and Protestant—refused to celebrate Christmas due to its pagan origins.)

Mythologist Joseph Campbell has written and spoken eloquently of how our modern Western world-view subverts our understanding of the pantheistic, nature-based religions common to our ancestors, and thus our understanding of nature mythology in general. In our predominantly monotheistic culture, the stories of the Judeo-Christian bible are presented to the faithful as literal, incontrovertible fact; thus when we look at the panoply of gods to be found in ancient lore, we imagine our credulous ancestors believed in these gods as flesh-and-blood beings striding across the hills and flying through the skies. Campbell has argued that ancient beliefs were far more nuanced and sophisticated. Adherents of animist religions understood these tales in symbolic terms. The gods and lesser supernaturals were *symbolic* of the sacred landscape ("Mother Earth" in Native American lore), and *symbolic* of psychological aspects of human nature writ large. Campbell and other mythic scholars based such interpretations of the myths on extensive study of animist religions still practiced in the world today—in India, Asia, Africa; in the South American rain forests; among the tribal peoples of North America, Australia, and the Sami of Scandinavia.

While monotheistic (single god) religions usually place the Lord God in a celestial realm above and removed from the soil of earth (dividing the flesh from the spirit, the former corrupt and the latter divine), animist religions place god *inside* nature, in every rock, stream, mountain peak, in every wind blowing from the four directions. The vastly different world-views of peoples who believed that god created the earth (and man to be lord and master over it) and people who believed that god *was* the earth, led to a tragic clash of cultures between Christians and pagans in old Europe—resulting, after several bloody centuries, in the almost complete demise of the latter. More recently, of course, this clash was reenacted with similarly disastrous results when monotheistic Europeans first came to the shores of America. As we begin to grasp the connection between *land* and *divinity* in animist religions, we begin to understand the profound devastation of Native American tribal groups forced to relocate from ancestral lands to Reservations on unfamiliar soil. Yet to the European pioneers—for whom land was a commodity to be won, bought and sold, and not the very flesh of god—the spiritual death represented by exile from sacred lands and migratory routes was incomprehensible. Two mythic belief systems had come into collision—and the tragic outcome can still be seen today, not only in the brutal poverty of many Reser-



Alan Lee travelled through Dyfed and Snowdonia with his sketchbook in hand to create illustrations (like this one) for *The Mabinogion* — the famous myth cycle of Wales.

vation areas, but also in the environmental degradation of this country in the last two hundred years.

"The White Father in Washington sends word that he wishes to buy our land," said the Suquamish chief Seattle in 1855. "But how can you buy or sell the sky? The idea is strange to us. If we do not own the freshness of the air and the sparkle of water, how can you buy them? Every part of this land is sacred to my people. Every shining pine needle, every sandy shore, every mist in the dark woods, every meadow, every humming insect. We know the sap as it courses through the trees as we know the blood that courses through our veins. We are part of the earth and it is part of us. The perfumed flowers are our sisters. The bear, the deer, the great eagle, these are our brothers. The rocky crests, the juices in the meadow, the body heat of the pony, and man, all belong to the same family. Will you teach your children what we have taught our children? That the earth is our mother? What befalls the earth, befalls all the sons of man. We love this earth as the newborn loves its mother's heartbeat. So, if we must sell you our land, love it as we have loved it. Care for it as we have cared for it. Hold in your mind the memory of the land as it is when you receive it. Preserve the land for all children and love it, as

it loves you." (For an interesting speculation on what might have happened had the White Father in Washington actually listened to these words, see Bruce Holland Rogers' alternate-history story "In the Matter of the Ukdema," in *The Year's Best Fantasy & Horror*, Vol. X.)

In his fascinating book *The Spell of the Sensuous* (a study of world mythology, animism, and language both oral and written), David Abram examines the centrality of landscape in myths and tribal tales from around the world. He notes, for instance, that Apache stories cannot be easily separated from the dry desert soil in which they grow. This is confirmed by the studies of Keith Basso, a linguist who has worked extensively with Western Apache at Cibecue, New Mexico. "Nothing is considered more basic [to the telling of a story] than identifying the geographical locations at which events in the story unfold. For unless Apache listeners are able to picture a physical setting for narrated events (unless, as one of my consultants said, your mind can travel to the place and really see it), the events themselves... will seem to 'happen nowhere,' and such an idea, Apaches assert, is both preposterous and disquieting."

He goes on to relate an anecdote about working with two Apache cowboys, string-

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ing a fence. One man talked softly all the while, reciting a string of place names "punctuated only by spurts of tobacco juice." When Basso asked him what he was doing, he explained that he liked to "talk names" to himself. "I like to ride that way in my mind," he said with evident satisfaction, as though he had indeed just returned from a leisurely circuit of his tribal lands. To speak the name is to evoke the place; to evoke the place is to evoke a story intimately connected to that precise spot in the mythic terrain. Poet Luci Tapahanso, a member of the Navajo nation from northern Arizona, also discusses the deep connection of "story" and "place" (in her 1993 collection *S'aniil Dahataal: The Women are Singing*.) Various features of the landscape often passed during family journeys prompted stories to told, retold, and passed down through the generations. "This land that may seem arid and forlorn to the newcomer," says Tapahanso, "is full of stories which hold the spirits of the People, those who live here today and those who lived here centuries and worlds ago.... [Among the Navajo,] a person who is able to 'talk beautifully' is well thought of and considered wealthy. To know stories, remember stories and retell them well is to have been 'raised right'; the family of such an individual is also held in high esteem." Tapahanso describes her writing as a way of holding on to ancestral stories, and through the stories, holding onto the land itself while living and working thousands of miles away. Yet for people without that gift, the ability to write and to "talk beautifully," moving away from the land can result in the loss of stories, cultural ties, and the balance of spiritual harmony which the Navajo call *hózhó* ("walking in beauty"). Keith Basso quotes the words of an Apache man who moved to Los Angeles to become a mechanic: "It was no good, sure no good. I started drinking, hanging around bars all the time. I started getting in trouble with my wife, fight sometimes with her. It was bad. I forget about this country here around Cibecue. I forget all the names and stories. I don't hear them in my mind anymore. I forget how to live right, forget how to be strong."

Among the indigenous people of Australia, ancient stories, rites and songs are woven into the fabric of daily life—a life lived in intimate association with the mythic landscape. The Ancestors of Aboriginal myth wandered across their continent while the earth was still in its infancy, singing as they went, shaping the features of the landscape with their steps. Eventually when the work of world-shaping was done, they went "back in" again, transforming into a physical aspect of the land, animal, or plant. "Each Ancestor," writes David Abram, "thus leaves in his wake a meandering trail of geographic sites, perceivable features in the land that are the result of particular events and encounters in that Ancestor's journey,

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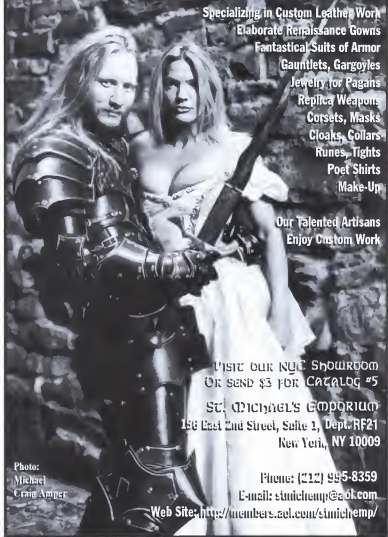
culminating in that place where the Ancestor went "back in," metamorphosing entirely into some aspect of the world we now experience. These meandering trails, or Dreaming tracks, are auditory as well as visible and tactile phenomena, for the Ancestors were singing the names and places into the land as they wandered through it. Indeed, each ancestral track is a sort of vast musical score that winds across the continent... The song is a kind of auditory route map through the country; in order to make her way through the land, an Aboriginal person has only to chant the local stanzas of the appropriate Dreaming, the appropriate Ancestor's song."

As the traveller, the Ancestors deposited "spirit children" all along criss-crossing songlines. When a pregnant woman feels the "quickening" (first kick) of the baby in her womb, it is said that the child's spirit has leapt from the land into her body. By determining the precise spot along the songline where this quickening has taken place, the child is known as the descendent of the Ancestor to whom the songline belongs (a clan allegiance he shares with all other descendants, even those from other tribes.) "In this manner every Aboriginal person, at birth, inherits a particular stretch of song...his title to a stretch of land, his conception site. This land is that part of the Dreaming from whence his life comes—it is that place on earth where he most belongs, and his essence, his deepest self, is indistinguishable from that terrain." Thus, in the Aboriginal world-view, not only do the gods dwell in the land, but man too is part of the sacred landscape. Myth is all round us here—not somewhere in the distant past, or off in a different reality. We dwell, simultaneously, in the waking world of daily life, and in the Dreamtime world of song and myth where the Ancestors still walk.

"Now, what it is a myth?" Joseph Campbell asks (in *The Power of Myth*, the published transcript of his conversations with Bill Moyers.) "The dictionary definition of a myth would be stories about gods. So then you have to ask the next question: What is a god? A god is a personification of a motivating power or a value system that functions in human life and in the human universe—the powers of your own body and nature. The myths are metaphorical of spiritual potentiality in the human being, and the same powers that animate our lives animate the life of the world. But also there are myths and gods that have to do with specific societies or the patron deities of the society. In other words, there are two totally different orders of mythology. There is the mythology that relates to your nature and the natural world (of which you're a part.) And there is the mythology that is strictly sociological, linking you to a particular society. In the history of European mythology, you can see the interaction of these two systems. Now, the biblical tradition is a socially oriented

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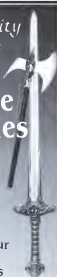
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mythology. Nature is condemned. In the nineteenth century, scholars thought of (animist) mythology and ritual as an attempt to control nature. But that is magic, not mythology or religion. Nature religions are not attempts to control nature but to help you put yourself in accord with it."

What, you may well be asking at this point, does all of this have to do with the reading and the writing of fantasy books? Let's take a look now at the large percentage of modern fantasy novels which draw upon themes and images from world mythology. These books can be divided into the same two camps Joseph Campbell has outlined above: stories based on myth systems which are strictly sociological (where magic is invested in individuals and social organisms, or in a god-like figure removed from or above the world of nature), and stories based on animistic, nature-based mythologies (where magic is the an aspect of the spiritual force of a real or imaginary landscape.) In general you'll find that the majority of modern fantasy novels (particularly multi-volume adventure novels) fall into the former camp - for this is a view of myth, religion and the world familiar to our culture.

When we turn and look at the other camp, however, we find some classic books indeed. J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* is set in a richly animate landscape—deeply steeped, as it is, in the Nordic, Germanic and Icelandic pagan myths which were this language scholar's life study. Ursula Le Guin is another master of the fantasy form who has created a complex and magical landscape, in the books of the Earthsea Quartet. Le Guin had the good fortune to be raised in a household of anthropologists; her bone-deep knowledge of ancient stories and cultures, as well as Taoist philosophy, gives the island world of Earthsea its unique resonance and spiritual core. Of all the fantasists working today, however, the one who has most extensively explored the magic of wind, rain, and soil is British author Robert Holdstock—in the books of his extraordinary "Mythago" series (*Mythago Wood*, *Lavondyss*, etc.), as well as in thematically related novels, *Ancient Echoes* and *Merlin's Wood*. "[Through writing these books] I've found an enhanced spiritual relationship with the earth I inhabit," says Holdstock. "This sounds New Age, and I don't mean it to be. My whole religious position has shifted dramatically back toward animism...." Susan Cooper, Alan Garner, and Lloyd Alexander have all written classic Young Adult novels drawing upon myths and rituals in distinctly Celtic landscapes, vivid with pagan imagery. Patricia McKillip's *Riddlemaster of Hed* series, Poul Anderson's *The Broken Sword*, Evangeline Walton's *The Island of the Mighty*, Diana Wynne Jones's "Dalemark" books, C.J. Cherryh's *Faery in Shadow*, Charles de Lint's *Spirit Walk*, Midori Snyder's *The Flight of Michael McBride*, Sean Russell's *The Sea*

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Without a Shore, J. Gregory Keyes's *Waterborn*, and Megan Lindholm's *Cloven Hooves* are all stories which invest the landscape itself with magic, and myth, and mystery.

"There are many things in Western culture that are admirable," says Gary Snyder, a poet who often works with the symbols of Japanese and Native American myth, "but a culture that alienates itself from the ground of its own being—from the wilderness outside (that is to say, wild nature) and from that other wilderness, the wilderness within—is doomed to a very destructive behavior, ultimately perhaps self-destructive behavior....You would not think a poet would [worry] about these things. But the culture that speaks to me as a poet, what Westerners have called the Muse, is the voice of nature herself, whom the ancient poets called the great goddess, the Magna Mater."

The Muse, for some of the best writers in our field, also speaks in the voice of the Magna Mater—and the works She has inspired them to create are marvelous indeed. As an editor, I am often asked for advice by young aspiring writers on how to best write magical fiction. I like to send these young people to the oldest stories of this earth—to myths, folklore and fairy tales—and to the modern writers of fiction and non-fiction who keep these stories alive. But perhaps the best advice of all is to listen for the voice of the Magna Mater as the ancient poets did—to turn to the natural world for creative inspiration, and lasting wonder.

Now the seasons are turning in Middle Earth, Islandia, Earthsea, and Ryhope Wood ... in the Dreamtime and in Cibecue...and in the land outside my window. As I close this column, on solstice eve, the dark of winter lies upon the world. The fires are lit. And this beautiful, ancient land is whispering stories.

[Recommended further reading: *The Power of Myth* by Joseph Campbell, *The Spell of the Sensuous* by David Abram, *The Practice of the Wild* by Gary Snyder, *The Gift* by Lewis Hyde, *Trickster Makes This World: Mischief, Myth and Art* by Lewis Hyde, *Dreamtime: Concerning the Boundaries Between Civilization and the Wilderness* by Peter Hans Duerr, *The Songlines* by Bruce Chatwin, *Aboriginal Mythology* by Mudrooroo, *The Well of Remembrance: Earth Myths of Northern Europe* by Ralph Metzner, *Family of Earth and Sky: Indigenous Stories About Nature from Around the World* by John Elder and Hertha D. Wong, *When the Desert Smells Like Rain* by Gary Nabhan, *Desert Quartet* by Terry Tempest Williams, *Sa'ami Sahataal: The Women Are Singing* (poems) by Luci Tapanhanso, *Turtle Island* (poems) by Gary Snyder, *The Book of Medicine* (poems) by Linda Hogan, *An Intellect of the Heart and The Wine of Connecting* (poems) by Bill Lewis (chapbooks available only from Greywolf Press, 66 Glencoe Rd., Chatham, Kent, U.K.). Please note that previous Folkroots columns can now be found reprinted on the Endicott Studio Web Site: <http://www.endicott-studio.com/>]



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Paul F. Ngantoko

*This is a true story. As true as such a story can be, at least.
And before I begin with the once-upon-a-time part
you need to know the sordid background,
the hard sordid dark factual background—
what was in the newspapers...*

UNICORN STEW

BY WILLIAM R. EAKIN
Illustration by Joel Naprstek

In the late '50s, according to a large number of *Felpham Gazette* stories, Bob Delashmit's new wife, Lenora May, who was in her late '40s and full of spite from about 20 years of another bad marriage, one that finally ended only in that fiery crash off Mulberry Cliffs, Lenora May Delashmit murdered Hank, sweet little dish-water blond Hank, little six-year-old Hank who hadn't and couldn't have hurt anyone in his whole damned life, who was just coming through reading *Dick and Jane* on his way to the *Hardy Boys*, little sweet Hank who loved his second-grade teacher down at the Consolidated Schools of Blake County enough to brave abuse from the kids there to take her an apple, and who hoped to be an architect, an inventor, an archaeologist, and a vegetarian when he grew up. According to the *Felpham Gazette*, the most authoritative source in Blake County or anywhere near, Lenora May Delashmit chopped Hank up into little pieces in perhaps the bloodiest and sickest thing ever to happen in the largely rural and somewhat economically depressed world outside of Redgunk, Miss., chopped him into little giblet-sized pieces and fed them, without Bob's even suspecting what might be happening, to Bob, because Bob turned out to be too much like her previous spouse, whom she'd worked darned hard to get rid of and finally did despite her lack of automotive wherewithal. Bob had beaten her more times than she could finally tolerate, you see, and, despite the fact that he knew her earlier husband had been up on Mulberry Cliffs poking away at the vows he'd taken with her down at the First Mount Zion Christian Church of Redgunk, despite what he knew, Bob had had the nerve to tell Lenora May he'd been to Winona's shack, too, many times and beginning some years before, even before his own first wife, already sickly, collapsed of a for-some-reason-punctured lung and ended up in that iron lung down at the General Hospital in Felpham, whispering prayers to herself and yearning yearning for the freedom she got, apparently, only after she passed away. And, God, Lenora'd scraped her delicate knuckles pretty badly cutting those brake wires when

she found the old T-Bird parked there in the dark night outside of Winona Master's little tar paper shack at the top of Mulberry Cliffs, but miraculously the sheriff let her go, let her off that time because there was no evidence—miraculously, I say because the sheriff and her former husband, whom she'd just killed, and Bob, whom she was about to marry, and just about every other man in Blake County, all of whom had been to see Winona at one time or another, were good friends, hunting partners, brothers-in-alcohol down at Burly Bob's Bar and Grill. So Lenora did a lot to get out of her first marriage and got away with it and somehow managed to marry Bob Delashmit, only to find there was no difference here, that she was right where she began, except now she had his two children to take care of, too. So she cut up that little boy, according to the papers. And if that was not the worst part—and this part was not in the newspapers, but rather oozed up from well-informed sources like the gossip-weavers of the Christian Ladies Auxiliary of the First Mount Zion Christian Church of Redgunk—after Bob Delashmit fell asleep in the swill he'd made of his own gut out of scotch whiskey and cannibal stew, after Bob slopped his way into sleep mumbling about female anatomy and better times now gone, she made the little girl go with her to bury the bones, she made Margaret, called Gretchen or Greta most lovingly by her dad, carry the bones that had been cooked away in the big witch's stew pot out back and help her bury them beneath the little juniper tree in the swampy woods just below the cliff.

And this part even the Christian Ladies never knew: When she was a little girl, Lenora May imagined that what her own mama told her was true, that magic things could happen in this universe. And Lenora's mama told her that in order to catch a unicorn, a virgin had to sit by herself in the woods, below a sacred tree—and there was a juniper seemed perfect for that living down at the bottom of Mulberry Cliffs—and that as the virgin sat and waited in a kind of silent, trembling anticipation, the unicorn would come and put its horny, horned head—hence the expression *horny*—right there in her

The last of my days comes close, it should have been the day of my marriage.
—Goethe's Gretchen in *Faust*

lap, full of a trust that meant it could be captured, like the little boys men become immediately after sex, only even more trusting than that. That is how one captures a unicorn and so one must remain a virgin, that is, unsullied by the world, not just physically a virgin, not just someone who slaps that hand that is crawling up her dress, but pure and clean and sweet and without suffering, like a little girl, all her life. That is how one must remain, Lenora's mama told her, that is how one must remain. And Lenora's mama could say that to a little girl because at that time there did seem to be some hope that in future generations, little girls would marry not swilling, cheating, stinking men with heavy obscene bodies, but real human males virtuous and true. Lenora's mama trembled when she told Lenora how to catch a unicorn and she hoped beyond hope that there was a kind of brilliant sky outlining castles on a sparkling horizon waiting, if not for herself, for Lenora and Lenora's daughters, and for their girls, too. Such was the hope deep down in the breast of Lenora's mama, who in turn was the daughter of a pioneer woman who never showed on the outside that she shared anything like that dream, but nevertheless possessed a gentleness that belied her sturdy, crusty, pioneer exterior and often emerged in the lullabies she sang making that home-hewn cradle rock back and forth, back and forth, into the wilderness night. Such was the dream. Such was the dream that Lenora passed on in a silent, weird whisper and in moments of shared silence to Greta as they walked through the patchwork of light and shadow in the black forest below Mulberry Cliffs. Such was the dream in content when Lenora told stories to Greta that day the Christian Ladies say the two went out and buried Hank's bones, though the tremble of hope had stopped.

According to general knowledge, it was on the pretext of showing her a holy tree of the sort that will attract unicorns that Lenora led Margaret into the woods, the little girl holding one handle of the trash can full of bones, Lenora the other. And then at the tree, according to rumor, Lenora told her: "These are your brother's bones," and made her look at them. "These are your brother's bones, and I want you to see them. I want you to see them. And then never tell a soul about them, not even yourself," Lenora thereby making herself the Wicked Stepmother. Wicked Stepmother, because, according to the account, it was then that little Greta folded into her unconsciousness that image of little bones down at the bottom of the trash can, folded it in like an egg white into the batter of some pastry so that it disappeared. And somehow that little dumpling, that little meat pie of consciousness invisible though it was, got inextricably and inexplicably linked to the possibility of catching a unicorn. And the Margaret of the rumors grew, and grew, and grew, a long-legged playful girl, a sweet pastry, with something that fluttered deep down inside her, something hidden in the batter but fluttering all the same, a bird caught in a basement cage.

To further validate all of this, Lenora confessed to the crime most of the reporters who came to the Blake County Courthouse for the proceedings called "heinous," first confessed it all one night in a tearful, fearful rage at Bob Delashmit when he was, as polite society would have it, "in his cups," and had clipped her two or three times against her jaw for being such a bitch all the time, when it became apparent that Bob just might now be after the girl, too, looking at her in little lecherous ways, and Lenora fell down in the hallway of their little house, the mascara running down her cheeks and shouted, "You wanna know where that boy of yours went? You wanna know? You ate him, you bastard, ate him, just like you try to eat everything, just like you try to eat me. And Greta." And needless to say, there was very little sympathy for a battered woman in those days if she'd done what Lenora had, if she'd chopped a man's very son up and fed the parts to him like he was some Greek king gone bad. And so she gave up and confessed again in a hot muggy crowded Mississippi courtroom with the prosecutor and the defense attorney and the county sheriff and the jury and every reporter in the state crowded into the courthouse and some outside on the sidewalks beneath the magnolias. Apparently, she gave up as if she gave up on that whole life of hers struggling against men and men's courts generally, and she confessed confessed confessed with a kind of diarrhea

of despair—though she did not confess to taking little Greta with her to the juniper tree and never did tell where those bones were—and she thereby became one of the first women in Blake County history to die by electrocution not hanging, though that was years in coming, years of appeal, purgatorial years of being raped mutilated tortured raped burned raped raped and raped, as customarily occurs in our penal system and, in fact, was no different from what happened between her and her husbands. And so finally with the hatred of the whole world bearing down on her, sometimes literally, she died for what she did. Died for what she did with a desperate hand—or at least a desperate tongue. Died with the stench of her own scorched hair in her nostrils and that hair flashing wildly about like a Medusa's, died with a single flash of imagery: that little white unicorn, for whom she'd longed and yearned and died over and over again since her mama first told her how to catch one! Lenora May Delashmit died with the image of a unicorn setting its horn in her virginal lap at her very last instant of time, and beyond.

Greta Delashmit grew up surprisingly normal (so everyone figured she'd blocked out the horror-story memories, blocked them out so she could function). Bob Delashmit couldn't do that: once he'd heard the "truth" about his boy from the witch's mouth, he fell into a slump of grumbling and depression that made him worthless to her as a dad, though perhaps saved her some abuse—he did not have the heart to be abusive, as if eating his own flesh and blood meant he'd eaten himself. So Greta cooked for them and took care of the both of them as long as she could. And she grew long-legged Pippy Longstocking-style into quite a pretty and very smart young girl and then, somehow managing to avert the path of her life away from proms and quick-feels in the backs of big battered red pick-up trucks, grew into a quite capable woman, who far from hanging around Mississippi to work as a waitress at Burly Bob's Bar and Grill or a clerk at Uncle Joe's Corner Liquor Store and Gas, went off to Austin, Tex., with a scholarship, got a bachelor of arts there and then a medical degree from Baylor University down in Houston with Medieval Literature as well as Endocrinology as a kind of hobby, then practiced medicine of a humane sort not particularly in vogue at the time, did so for some years, then got out of practicing medicine to administer her own string of rural clinics in Texas, Louisiana, and Oklahoma, finally developing her chain into one of the early, most long-lived and successful HMOs, which she saw to its fruition in a major and well-televised merger with a large Japanese corporation, enabling her to retire in incredible comfort. But instead of settling down in Galveston or Pass Christian or even Beverly Hills, like she could have done, she came back to Redgunk, Miss., and bought a massive portion of Blake County, including all of Mulberry Cliffs and the woods below; she built a nice but small cedar house right at the top of the cliff, and she settled down after some 50 years, that little egg white jiggling and working quietly and inherently in what was now a slightly more cooked, even a bit crusty, late-middle-aged woman.

And she'd never really had time for boys or men, never really missed them, actually, and that is just as well, because in her private times, she had privacy and could grow on her own, like a tree mostly unencumbered and therefore not twisted by lots of large foliage blocking the sun and eating the minerals from the soil. And she grew on her own into one of those women who are very capable and very professional and yet have a propensity for things of fantasy and a touch of magic and, in her case, a collection of unicorn paraphernalia that no husband could have tolerated for its immensity, its concatenation of pastel colors, its wispy, dreamy, Rococo passion. She collected unicorns—completely worthless, but somehow the completion of a process started in the pioneer-woman ancestors of both her natural- and her step- mothers.

You told an egg white into a batter, the Christian Ladies of the Auxiliary will tell you, and it yields a certain consistency, a certain way of being, if you will, just like if you put yeast or leaven into a dough it will rise, grow, be what it is in its own particular way. Like a seed will lay small and dormant and then, one day, it is a tree. But you know all that.

What you don't know is that old lady Greta Delashmit—whom everyone assumed had the memory of her dead brother's bones in her—lived up at the top of Mulberry Cliffs and got older and older with that unicorn collection of hers and, like any loner, grew a little scary to the denizens of the backwoods of Blake County: The hunters stopped walking through that part of the deer woods, and little boys who used to play with the daredevil assuredness of being too young and not knowing their own finitude would sometimes spy her in the early mornings on her deck drinking her coffee before she combed her hair, when she herself looked like a Medusa of sorts, and so they thereby learned a little of their own mortality, and started more often playing the video games down at Uncle Joe's Corner Liquor Store instead of racing in the woods.

I told you this is a true story and, in fact, you need to know what really happened and not go merely on the evidence of newspapers or sewing circles. So, before I tell you how I found out what truly happened, let me tell you what did:

Once upon a time there was a unicorn, a real unicorn, one with consciousness and sentience and intelligence, though physically often just a flash, a light, a moving shade. And the unicorn ran free and wild in the black woods at the bottom of Mulberry Cliffs, just six miles south of Redgunk, Miss., and though the kudzu grew thick and snaky in patches here and there, nothing could grasp him or hold him back, and he could travel at very nearly the speed of light, which even in Blake County is about 186,000 miles per second.

Once upon a time there was a unicorn, a real unicorn, I kid you not, and his eyes flashed with silver fire and when he ran, though you did not see him, you felt him, you felt the breeze of his passing by in the kudzu woods, and maybe you thought wild Arabesque thoughts, or maybe you thought home-thoughts, sweet or sometimes bittersweet, of your mama or of some lost third-grade sweetheart or of your daddy limping through the halls of Windy Pines Residence Center, a little off the mental base, or of Icarus who flew as high as is imaginable only to have his wings melt there at the sphere of the sun and to know in an instant—in that same instant of greatest joy—that the flight cannot last and that he and you must fall, that moment when joy bears with it such a weight of knowing its own finitude and yours that it brings tears to your eyes, so-called tears of happiness. The unicorn ran by, clipity-clipity-clipity, and your eyes turned teary inexplicably—like when you looked at your own child or you came to the end of *It's A Wonderful Life* for the hundredth time—that is how you felt when the unicorn brushed by, in those surprising and unannounced moments: like you could burst with the joy and the melancholy of life.

Once upon a time the crystal-invisible unicorn ran through the black kudzu woods, and drunken hunters without knowing why intentionally missed their five-point bucks and went home empty-handed for the first time in their hunting-lives, and that boy with his hand under his girlfriend's pink sweater stopped inching his fingers upward, withdrew them and, instead, caressed her face with the strange and awesome gentleness he now felt for her for the first time, a gentleness in sex that his general habit of mind would have otherwise made impossible but for the cool-breeze that now ran across him. And some anonymous artist living in the woods off County 63, who painted those unicorn faces on the black velvet tapestries that still sell at Uncle Joe's Corner Liquor Store and Gas for \$5.95, without knowing she had been passed by a real unicorn and had breathed in the crystal-clear air of his passing, she painted

LENORA MAY DELASHMIT CHOPPED HANK UP INTO LITTLE PIECES IN PERHAPS THE BLOODIEST AND SICKEST THING EVER TO HAPPEN... OUTSIDE OF REDGUNK

a unicorn face on the velvet that this time she could not bring herself to sell, that indeed would be priceless if anyone else ever saw it, though no one would. And at the unicorn's presence, the wild geese honked across the sky with a celebratory passion from their fast moving V, and the kudzu itself twittered in the unicorn-breeze, and children—not only children—lying in their gentle nap-consciousness in the curtain-darkened rooms of their mobile homes, heard the clipity-clipity-clipity of the hooves rushing by, not really touching the earth, and they went to sleep only to wake up some years later as great men, great women, full of a kind of genius

that was somehow beyond them and yet simultaneously identical to their true nature, filled with a kind of genius when they grew up artists and peacemakers and scholars in spite of their upbringings and the poorly funded education system of the Consolidated Schools of Blake County.

Once upon a time there was a real unicorn dashing through the Mississippi woods where his presence seemed least likely, a real one dashing through the black woods and up along the ridge line of Mulberry Cliffs, flashing through dreams and trees and shadows and rocks, and rushing again down through the glades and the waterfalls and the swamps and the kudzu and coming finally, finally to the place of the holy tree where the woman sat, the woman not too-youngish and certainly not a maiden, the woman waiting for him though she did not know that was what she did while she contemplated and contemplated and burningly contemplated the murder of a little boy, because she found herself too damned far from maidenhood or even real marriage, and this, damn it, was supposed to be her real wedding-time, this was supposed to be what life was meant to be and not just more sewer-shit, not more violence, not more stupid bulky fleshy drunken male-violence hovering over her and hurting her and taking her maidenhood away again and again and again. And though again there had been a wedding-in-form, a new so-called marriage, this was still not what she'd come to earth for, this was not what she'd grown up for, to be treated like this, some slut, some victim, some whore, some whipping boy. This was not what she'd grown up for, to be so wrangled up inside, her intestines and her heart twisting together like loose snakes made so crazy that she was driven to this: the contemplation of more than just murder, but the murder of a little boy, and little boy stew, and feeding feeding feeding the black, empty soup to that man, to all men, ending forever the search for real marriage. Ending it.

And the unicorn was compelled by an inexorable force to set his head in her lap, her warm Madonna-mother-maiden lap. Unicorns are so compelled, friend.

And he looked into her eyes with his: steel, gray, flashing, and the light-windish mere spirit-body of the tiny horned horse slowed, thickened, slowed until his body really was body, flesh and fur and pulsing blood, and until his heart was no longer the beat beat of some spirit-thing interfused in wood and sky, but a fleshy heart that beat beat beat and beat and could beat no more. So that she did not have to kill the unicorn, but merely lifted the little thing's carcass to take it home, to the kitchen, in place of the boy.

I have been a writer now since I can remember, since the Hoffmanns first found me sitting on the old Stagecoach Road that runs up to Nain. My presence alone on that road was inexplicable to them and to me, and virtually all my memories of life before were gone in me by the time I came around to speaking again, some year later, and they did not make the connection even when

they read of Lenora May Delashmit's arrest and trial, not until the *Felpham Gazette* ran a copy of my photograph on the front page, which they did the same day Lenora May was executed in order to add poignancy and sheer emotive shock value to the story—me with my blond cowlick and freckled-fresh six-year-old face plastered right next to a sort of surrealistic photo of Lenora on her way to the chair. And I didn't know anything about it either, about the past time or about the Hoffmanns' quite intentional silence—because they did not want to lose me, their little peach boy—or about the murder and the nonmurder in my subconscious life, until I was going through Mrs. Hoffmanns' belongings and saw the photo, too, the day after her funeral and me somewhere close to 55.

And Mrs. Hoffmann, the day she saw that photograph, I am sure, put the puzzle together and told Mr. Hoffmann, "I'll be, that Lenora May Delashmit woman got her revenge—though that boy is with us now. She told that old man it was the boy he ate, told him, then let the whole faked story of the murder come out, so that all the way down the line even to the chair it would hold water, so much so that it burst Old Man Delashmit's heart. I'll be, I'll be damned." And she said this with a vindictive glee, as if she could have done that very same thing. "She didn't have to kill no one, she didn't kill no one—well, except maybe her first husband—but she didn't have to kill no one to get at that old man Bob Delashmit." Funny how the newspaper makes everyone like family, experts on your affairs. And even if Mrs. Hoffmann hadn't seen it was me that was supposed to have died, she would have been full of a near-ecstasy just to know how craftily someone's misery was engineered.

"She drove him crazy. All she had to do is leave a boy in a gas station someplace—or on the road to Nain. Cook up some deer meat or something. Smart. Damned smart."

Yep. That was it. That was why Old Bob Delashmit spent most of the rest of his life pacing back and forth across a traffic-thinned carpet while that little girl cooked his meals and made his mixed drinks and stayed generally out of his way until she could no longer take care of him because he was falling sometimes and once couldn't even get up out of the tub, though he was relatively young in body, and so spent the remainder of his life pacing back and forth but mostly sitting in the sterile halls of the Windy Pines Residence Center.

"Got 'im like he deserved it!" was what I imagined Mrs. Hoffmann saying to her husband, when she also added numerous comments to justify their not telling anybody about my real identity. And that was what I imagined her saying with a smugness that maybe only one woman can feel in sympathizing with another, even if they're strangers. It was what I imagined her saying as I went through her little shoe box of photos and old newspaper clippings and canceled checks and things like that that belong to the dead, after she herself slipped into the afterlife from complications of what she called the "sugar disease." It was what I imagined her saying as I was struck with a strange, eerie realization that what Lenora had done she might have done not merely from Mrs. Hoffmann's vindictiveness motive, but strangely, to protect me, to get me outta there, because I was struck with just the vaguest memories from maybe when I was four or five of the old man cuffin' me pretty hard in the ears and over the head and once hitting me until my nose bled, for no particular reason, and then crying how he loved me, loved me and couldn't help beatin' the straightness back into me when I misbehaved, vague memories of me once very nearly dying from the beating that left me in the ER at the County General in Felpham. While all this time I thought

myself merely abandoned, perhaps I had escaped. Perhaps she helped me escape. And thinking this the memories started tumbling back, a chunk at a time, in weird little places: there looking into the shoe box and later, at work or in the store in front of the macaroni and cheese or driving on some curve out of Nain. "Got 'im like he deserved it!" was what I imagined her saying—though she got it only partially right—as I decided there and then to drive up to Redgunk, Miss., and to Mulberry Cliffs, to see if there was anything left of me, where in my place, no doubt, were the boiled and bleached bones of some deer or something that had taken my place.

There is a motel on the road to Nain, the Swine back Motel, and that is where I checked in, without telling anyone, to begin my snooping around. It was two or three days before

I tracked down the location of the woman whom I knew to be my sister, mostly with the help of old *Felpham Gazette* articles, and another day of homemade whiskey soups in that mildewy room with its oversized roaches and smoky curtains and frizzy snowy television set before I finally got up the courage to even decide to go see her, and I only decided this because I'd agreed to myself to tell her who I was only in person. And I imagined how joyful she would be, seeing me, touching me, embracing me, after all this time thinking me dead and, in fact, murdered. And on a brisk fall morning I walked—walked, mind you, being a fairly robust mid-50s—walked up the county-graded road that snaked through the black woods on the eastern side and then up the mountain.

I passed the tar paper shack, now with trees and greenbrier growing through the roof, that I knew from Gazette photos to be the home of Winona Master, now mostly comatose though with a quite pleased look on her face down at Windy Pines. I went through a clearing and there on the cliff was my sister's house. My sister's house!

Now perhaps you cannot imagine how I felt standing there, with the cedar A-frame in the distance. Imagine being a boy, who wakes up one day in the home of strangers with only vague memories of the preceding six years, wakes up in the home of strangers who adopt him and gradually come to love him, and who subsequently protect him from any knowledge of who he might really be—some not-murdered kid of some electrified step-corpse and some other shriveled mummy of a mother he'd never really known, taken from an iron lung someplace and put into the ground at Redgunk Cemetery, and of some abusive bastard of a father who himself

deserved to die and in some ways did fairly early, pacing and finally sitting with a *zazen*-kind of silence in a place surrounded by the sick and dying. Imagine, friend, being some blond, sweet boy with no one, no one, except those foster parents, and then someday after stalwartly, stoically forging a life for himself as a writer and a teacher at a local community college—a teacher of humanities, art and architecture, by the way, so that something of a childhood dream to be a builder of buildings and an excavator of the past could come partly true, i.e. someone vaguely interested in not much of anything—imagine suddenly waking up there in the belongings of your foster mother and seeing into the yellowed crudely cut-out pieces of newspaper that you had a life before this time, and that the life was strange and dark and twisted, and that you were supposed by most of the world to be dead and eaten—eaten!—but you weren't, you weren't! That you had supposed yourself to be cruelly abandoned, but you weren't that either, not that either, by a woman who was now gone in an electric fizzle so that you no longer had the possi-

MRS. HOFFMANN...
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bility of asking her, "Oh, you didn't merely abandon me, really, after all—? You were protecting me?" And then even knowing that this was true, imagine being unable to discuss it or give her any thanks. I think I would have thanked her, despite mixed feelings, despite what the rest of the world thought of her, like a little boy who would give an apple to his teacher. But it was impossible to do. Imagine you had no one. But someplace, somewhere was a sister, with vibrant blood bursting through her veins, real and alive and companionable, perhaps, capable of sharing your real life as no one—no one—had been since you were supposedly stewed. Imagine with what trembling fingers you would look at those newspaper clippings again, this time in the Swineback Motel out on the road to Nain but only a few miles from her, from the sister, from the one person you could even conceivably relate to. *Companion*: Do you know what the Greek roots of that word are? *Cum*: with; *panis*: bread. *Companion*: one with whom you break bread.

And I had walked very nearly to her deck before I saw her, she standing there with her hair uncombed, drinking coffee and looking—well, looking like a Medusa. And she said, "Hello. Can I help you with something?"

"Just walking. Enjoying your woods, your view—these cliffs are magnificent. And the trees—"

We looked so much alike, even with our hair gray now. And some ease fell between us immediately, on sight, she did not see me as a stranger, though I doubt she consciously saw how alike we were, and she said, "Care for a piece of toast?"

Not many people come up this way—any more. Toast. Bread. I nodded.

She had been eating breakfast at a little round table there on the deck, listening to the birds, and she motioned for me to sit, me the familiar stranger. "Bacon?" she offered.

"No thanks," I motioned. "Vegetarian. But some of that jam?"

"Yes," she whispered as she pushed it to me. I looked in her eyes. Some mist cleared and I saw a little girl's face, little Gretchen's face, little Greta's!

"Margaret—" I gasped under my breath.

She straightened slightly. I could see how local boys might think her frightening, her gray hair waving back and her face, though calm and gentle, capable of real power. "You know me?"

I took a quick bite of toast, in case a moment of companionship would have to come to a quick end, then said, "I—I confess, I'm not merely walking in the woods."

"What can I do for you?"

"I—I read about you in the newspaper."

"Oh?"

"Yes, uh, 1994, I believe, *Felphum Gazette* feature article—"

Her features relaxed just a bit. "Silly article."

It was a very nice profile. A big thing, you know, someone like you buying up so much land and coming back to the county to live. I—But I was most interested in that collection of yours—the photo spread couldn't do it justice, I'm sure. The article said it was one of the largest in the world—"

"Third largest noncommercial, in fact. Do you like unicorns, Mister—uh?"

"Hoffmann. But call me—call me Hank."

"Hank? I once knew someone named—Hank."

"Yes, yes, I—I read that in the newspapers, too."

"I see."

I could not read her expression and got worried about what she might be thinking and said quickly, "Well, I came—I came to—inquire if I might see—the collection. Your unicorns. Your unicorns."

She raised her eyebrows a bit and then smiled with a warmth I knew I was capable of, but had somehow never managed to muster. She was no doubt my better half, this sister of mine. Stronger. Somehow happier.

"Do you know anything about unicorns, Hank?"

I looked at her—she now looking a bit skeptically at me—and I shook my head.

"Well, come then. I'll show you."

I set my half-eaten toast down on a napkin, and followed her inside.

She spoke as she entered the room, a room lined on all sides and stretching off into other rooms with the collection. She said, "You know, then, my biography, and that people live on, something terrible happens to them and not really to them, but to the people around them, and they live on. Well, Hank, it's true."

I started to speak but she kept on, strangely eager, as if she was not accustomed to human company—she spoke nothing frivolous, spoke with a peculiar calm mixed with passion, as if she opened up her whole self and, in addition, wanted to speak authoritatively on everyone else's.

"We live on, Hank, though the world is a massive spinning ball of suffering and half of us want to get off and the other half sits stewing thinking, someday, someday they will let me outta here, they will let me out and I will go flying off into nonexistence and I'll be better off when that happens because if there ain't justice here in this sphere well maybe there is in another one—"

It was peculiar, the way she comported herself toward me, like a preacher. What right did she have to do that, to talk to me like that? She kept on and on, though, and it started making me uncomfortable. Damned uncomfortable. "Well, Hank, I've been a doctor, you know, and I have seen what I have described, and I have seen people beside their own beds praying for their own death without knowing they've been already living it, and Hank, I have seen the face of people who have suddenly been told and suddenly realize, God, this is it, we really do sometimes only have a moment to live and maybe this person I'm looking at is the last person I'll ever see and her eyes or his eyes are my last chance for a real, genuine encounter with another human being—" And she looked me directly in the eyes with an intensity I could not stand, and I had to look away, because I was afraid she'd look right in and see who I really was, and for some reason just this moment I did not want to tell her, I was not comfortable enough to do it, too afraid, too damned weirded out, and I felt what those boys must have felt who saw her with her wild hair standing on her deck and who ran off into the woods to spend the rest of their teenage years hiding in a videomachine.

I looked away, and she kept talking, talking, talking when all I'd meant to do was come up here, tell her who I was and have a nice little reunion: but now her gaze was penetrating me, rushing down on me as if it were a heavy beast made of invisible light, heavy enough to crush me. And for no reason at all, no reason at all, I felt ashamed.

Ashamed. Ashamed. Because someone—that woman in the electric chair—had died for me?

Something changed, something shifted in her voice—I felt like I was falling into a pit, like one of those deep dark pits in the passageways of ancient Egyptian tombs; I tried to shake the feeling. Funny, how there are people in the world whose presence is so damned powerful that they make you see in a radically different way, like for just a moment you are really seeing, and the change is so frightening you have to fight to stay in your illusions, on the surface. Her voice changed, as if she could feel my shame. It was compassionate: "But look Hank," and her arms swept a broad circle indicating all the collection—a galaxy of unicorn things. "Look, we keep going. Do you understand how people can keep going, strong, into the sun, no matter what has happened?"

Perhaps she was mad: yes that must be it. The woman was mad. I did not know what to say. "I—it's a very impressive collection." It was a very, thankfully superficial comment. And it helped me sprout enough of a superficial shell around my eyes now that I could look up.

Then her demeanor changed again. She paused and said, "You didn't come here to see it, did you?" Her voice was not condemning, but she did not look at me. She spoke as if she played a part in a play, knowing full well the truth was something else: "You came to gawk, for whatever reason. You read about a little girl whose stepmother killed her brother and fed him to her father. You read about it and now you come to see the little girl grown up with a dead spirit,

to gawk at her—"

"I—I'm a writer."

"Oh, I see."

"They say—they say that she took you into the woods and made you look at his bones. But—what if he wasn't really?—"

"Bones? Yes I saw the bones."

"But—"

"Buying the property here—don't you think I had a motive for doing that? I have the bones."

"But I don't understand—"

"Do you want to understand?"

"No, but you see, I'm—"

"Do you want to understand?" she repeated. For some reason, I had to catch a sob in my throat and swallow it down. Understand? Understand the whole thing, my whole life? Oh, God, more than anything!

"Look, Hank, look at the collection!" And she waved my eye along the shelves. And suddenly I could do nothing but look, look as if through a pixie dust, glittering and flowing and flying. Her directing gesture was of one who not only made herself successful and powerful in this realm, but who also somehow touched or was touched by another. She lifted her finger and it was like the staff of a shaman and at her gesture I was shot into another world.

And in the world of the collection were: rainbow painted ceramic horse with gold-plated single horn; girl's plastic toy with pastel glitter in its blue-haired mane; pewter Baroque-twisting fantasy sculptured figurine, three inches high; blown-glass horse with wild, dreamy crystal mane; crude molded plastic horse-and-knight set; a tapestry, a real Medieval tapestry, Cluniac in origin, hanging between shelves, the material rich in color, burgundy with green and blue foliage wildly organic, and in its center, a maiden with the unicorn's head nestled into her lap; wood-block prints, print after print, of the Japanese *kirin*, the great unicorn—in some prints, with the body of a bull, in others a deer—scenes of the *kirin* in the courts of law and in matters of murder assisting perplexed judges in determining guilt and innocence, real innocence; a delicate sculpture of the Chinese *Ki-Lin*, part male, part female, the two parts, indeed, joined into a single body, its horn curving forward with precision and a single will; a calligraphed erotic poem, something Arabic; a single page, illuminated, of a Gothic zoological text, in Latin, and another, Ambrosian, dreaming of the wild wood and declaring the unicorn in nature to be an allegory of things in another, more real realm. A winged horned dragon here, carved in walrus ivory; a narwhale horn there, done in Gothic foliage; a shell-cup of supposed unicorn horn-scrapsings, its inscription telling of a miraculous healing power in the powder; a marionette, cement garden ornaments, a hundred plastic snow domes, several \$5.95 velvet paintings and finally in a holy, sacred but plain corner of a far room, a skull, a tiny, elongated skull, resting in that corner of that far room on a pile of bones, real bones, a skull with a not-too small lump on its forehead.

"His bones," she whispered. "I dug 'em up."

"Your b-brother's—?"

She looked again into my eyes and there was contact, flashing, flashing contact, and we both knew, she knew and I knew, that someone had stood in for me, someone had made the sacrifice for me, and for her, someone! I turned away. I could not acknowledge to her who I was, even though I knew she somehow already knew it.

Someone, something, had made the sacrifice so that we could live! So that we could be here. Someone in an electric chair. And someone more—

"So, it is true she took you to see your brother's bones?" I asked.

"My brother's bones? Why should she do that?"

"I—I—don't know. The rumor is ... Anger?" The Wicked Step-mother. I looked at the skull, the little hooves, the tiny skeleton.

"Anger? At me? Hank, there comes a point, no doubt, when the actions of a woman look to all the world like spite. But these—these are what she showed me, friend. Hardly the skeleton of a boy." Not with the protuberance on his head.

Someone had stood in for me.

"And I, Hank, am alive, alive now because of her and what she showed me. I am fully alive, enough to come back here and dig them up and feel, feel and *revel* in what was hoped for—the hope for the magic of life that did not die with her. I am alive enough to have lived the world with gusto, Hank; she made that possible by showing me the bones. And, of course, someone else, too, made it possible—"

For some reason I did not have the energy to ask; she told me: "The unicorn, Hank. The unicorn." The bones of a real unicorn? "Have you, Hank, lived life with gusto? It has been given you, you know. As a gift."

Damn it, had I lived life with gusto? What the hell kind of bullshit question was that and what right did she have to ask it? I could not live more fully than I was capable of! I started to protest, but the look in her eye was stunning, and the pastel-pixie dust of the collection made me swoon: *feel the pulse of the blood in your veins again*, she told me, the collection told me, *feel the pulse again or for the first time!*

I squinted my eyes at her, trying to understand, trying to comprehend. Something living, something living in her eyes and in the collection and in that tiny skull was doing its damndest to open me up. *Stop being such an asshole*, it told me, *and then maybe you, too, can live*. It was trying to rip me open. *Stop living like a lost little boy—and feel it*. There was a presence in the bones. I felt it and it startled me, it startled me now as it jumped invisibly but palpably into the air and danced like a wild wind in the room. It twisted around us with an invisible rainbow-glitter—the kind of glitter little girls make visible, coloring onto pictures of unicorns, the kind they imagine castles in clouds to be made of, the kind Lenora and her mother and her mother before that had imagined life and marriage and hope to be made of, until it seemingly slipped from their hands into colorlessness. The presence from the bones that now swirled in the room: They had dreamed of it—perhaps dreamed it into existence—whether they knew it or not. Something indescribable and pure and powerful now lived here in this room! It danced and danced around me, with wild sharp hooves and a great rush of glitter and it seemed to want to rip me open. The unicorn: It was a feeling made real, a feeling too intense for human beings, it was a passion and a spirit and a horn too sharp for flesh. And it was calling me, luring me, to open up. In the rush of wind all around me, I felt the beast's lure: More than mere hope, it offered and was something like fantasy fused with reality, like past-hope fused with a full moment of fruition. *Come to it, Hank*. It was luring me toward a moment of fruition. *Come to it, the moment that can give meaning to everything*. And it was so damned alluring that it was also simultaneously the most frightening thing I could imagine, and now I almost screamed, but I could not. I gasped instead, and for the first time, I felt alive, alive with hope and with fear. God, I felt alive. I felt like I had survived! I felt like—there was real life somewhere in this dead-husk of a far room. In this room. And it was mine for the taking.

This was the gift that the unicorn brought to the maiden beneath the holy tree, allowing itself to be captured: One moment of union, the maiden's soul with its own, a moment of union when a girl's dreams suddenly matched the world so closely, so isomorphically, that fantasy lived, and life, powerful life, was possible. *Have a moment, Hank, when what you have wanted, companionship, love, life and exuberance, and more than that, self, new self is made real*. It was mine! That moment was mine if I just reached into the swirl and grabbed it. But I could not do it!

The invisible unicorn twisted then, and moved faster, faster, a wind through our hair and across our faces. It rushed rushed rushed around us like a spirit of ecstasy. And I sensed how close, how painfully close the union was and I again almost cried out at the sheer power of life. You see there was suddenly nothing sad about Lenora May going to her death in the electric chair; she had seen this, this thing, living. There was nothing sad about a small horned horse giving its life for the life of another, for me, because it was still here. Because the unicorn lived, here in the room with us: a spirit, an ecstasy—an ecstasy so close, so close I could touch it and become it, if I only reached for it, something living at the end

SNEAK A PEAK AT A QUARTET OF STUNNING NEW NOVELS
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FOUR FACES OF FANTASY

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PREVIEW!**



Dear Reader:

Any technology sufficiently advanced is indistinguishable from magic. Arthur C. Clarke once said that, and he couldn't have been more on the mark. Now that science has caught up to science fiction, "magical" things are happening all around us. Whether it's sticking a card in a machine and having the machine give you money, or using a joystick to move characters around a world full of wizards and monsters, most people are experiencing "miracles" (translated: amazing things that we don't really understand!) every day.

So what does this have to do with you, a fantasy reader? Simply this: In a world that is already full of amazing things, where there are more and more ways to give you a taste of unreal worlds (tv, movies, computer games, the Internet, etc.), it takes some really special voices to create for you the fully immersive other-world experiences that you have come to love...and even crave.

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Jim Clemens uses an intimate scale to illuminate a grand design: a world under the shadow of evil, a searing prophecy...and the weight of it all on some very human shoulders.

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What follows are four excerpts—to excite your imagination, to give you a taste of these upcoming books, and to remind you that the worlds of fantasy are varied and wondrous and neverending...

Enjoy!

Shelly Shapiro
Executive Editor
Del Rey Books

WITCH FIRE

BY JAMES CLEMENS

From a brilliant new voice in fantasy comes a band of heroes, a world in peril, and an unforgettable heroine whose unexpected magic awakens an ancient, slumbering evil.

The juggler, bare-chested stepped to the edge of the stage and set down his pan. A few in the audience mumbled and pointed fingers toward him. He knew the fingers pointed to his right shoulder where his arm should have been.

The juggler tossed his four knives in the air, slicing the pipe smoke of the room into thin ribbons. He watched the first tumble back toward his left hand, and with practiced indifference, snatched the hilt and returned the knife aloft with a flick of the wrist. He sent the remainder chasing after the first. The spinning blades caught the flame of the torches and blazed back to the audience clustered up to the inn's rickety stage.

Appreciative ooh's and ahh's echoed thinly from some in the audience, but most of their attention was on the quality of the ale being proffered by the inn and the promptness of the service. With one eye on his knives, the juggler watched a harried barmaid wallowing through the crowd, a platter laden with sloshing glasses balanced about her head. She wore the plastered smile of the overworked.

He nodded briefly to acknowledge the clink of a coin in the pan at the foot of the stage. It's how one earned a living on the road.

"Hey, buddy!" someone yelled from the stage's apron, his voice slurred with a generous lubrication of ale. "Careful there with those fancy pig pokers, or you might lose your other arm."

Someone else cackled from near the back of the room and answered the drunken man. "Careful

there yourself, Bryn, you're standing awful close to someone whirling knives. He might just clip off that ugly woolyworm under your nose you call a mustache."

The Audience roared at the jibe.

The insulted man, balding with a thick curled and waxed mustache, pounded a footboard of the stage. Well, Strefen, at least I'm man enough to grow one."

This was not a good sign; when the audience found more entertainment among the tables rather than the stage, he would catch few coins in his pan tonight. He needed to gain their attention. These days, even a one-armed juggler sometimes warranted no more than passing interest.

He let a knife fall to the floor, feigning loss of control. The blade struck into the wooden stage with a thunk and sank deep into the board. This caught the audience's eyes. Nothing like failure to draw attention derisive laughter bubbled from the crowd—until each knife, one at a time, supposedly toppling uncontrolled, landed its blade tip into the hilt of the one below it—thunk, thunk, thunk—ending up with all four knives stacked in a row on top of each other.

The tower of knives waved back and forth in front of the stunned guests of the inn. A smattering of claps spread into a moderately enthusiastic applause. The tinkle of a few coins in his pan accompanied the acknowledgment.

Each coin, which could otherwise be spent on ale, was hard won. If he wanted to purchase dinner tonight, he still needed a few more coins. He seldom earned enough to put a roof over his head in the evening, but he was used to sleeping under his horse.

He swung the side of the stage and opened his satchel. He retrieved a set of oiled torches. He grabbed the three in his fist and lit them from a flaming brand in a brazier. They flared to life. The audience responded with a hush when each torch burned a different color—a deep green, a sapphire blue, and a red deeper than ordinary flame.

He turned to face the audience with the torches raised high and flung them upward, almost to the rafters of the inn's common room. As they cascaded down, showering a trail of light, he caught them up and returned them toward the roof.

The applause was now vigorous, but he still heard a few coins tapping into his pan. So he sent the torches even higher, his bicep bulging with the effort, the heat of the torches burned until his body shone under a thin oil of sweat. A few women ooh'ed to the left of the stage, but he noticed from the corner of his eye, they were staring at his physique and not the cascading torches. He had learned that there were other ways to earn a living on the road, and he was not above showing his wares.

As he worked the torches, he flexed his shoulders, displaying his wide chest and ample musculature. Black-haired and grey-eyed, with the ruddy complexion of the plainsmen of his home, he had been known to juggle more than knives and torches to earn a room and a bed.

More coins were flipped into his cache.

With a flourish, he bowed with all three torches still aloft. The audience gasped as the torches tumbled toward his bowed back. He noticed one of his buxom admirers raised a concerned hand to her mouth. Just as the torches were about to hit, he performed a standing flip and caught each torch, one at a time, sailing the torches into a waiting bucket of water. Each sizzle of vanquished torch accelerated the clapping. When he was done, the audience were on their feet clapping and stomping table tops with mugs.

With a wave, he collected his knives and pan and leaped from the stage, pulling on his leather jerkin.

Eyeballing the pile of coins, he knew he would eat well tonight, and with luck, he might have

enough for a room at the inn. If not, he spotted a few ladies who still had an eye fixed on his bare chest. There *were* other options.

The innkeeper waddled toward him. "Where's my cut?" he said in a wheeze.

The juggler counted out the proper percentage of coins to pay for his use of the stage. The innkeeper's eyes watched each copper descend into his meaty palm. The juggler expected him to begin licking his lips at any moment, the lust so evident in the keeper's eyes.

"That's all?" he said, shaking the fistful of coins. "You're holding out on me."

"Your percentage has been met." The juggler stared the innkeeper square in the eye.

The innkeeper backed down with a grumble and swatted a barmaid out of his way as he returned to his post further down the bar. Another barmaid, a comely lass with thick blond hair in braids, slipped a glass of ale in front of him while the innkeeper had his back turned. "Enjoy," she whispered to him with a slight smile and lowering of lash. "Something to cool the fire in you. Until later." She continued to the next customer, with only the briefest glances back to him.

No, his horse would definitely be sleeping alone tonight.

He collected his ale and twisted around to watch the next performer mount the stage. This was a tight crowd, and after his performance, he pitied the young boy he saw climbing the steps to the stage.

Not *boy*, he realized once he saw the performer straighten. She was small, and the gray trousers and plain white shift she wore did little to highlight her feminine attributes, the few that there were.

The crowd ignored her as she slipped a lute from a cloth case. The tables grew raucous; pipe and torch smoke thickened the air.

The juggler sighed. This was not going to be a pleasant sight. He had seen other performers pelted from the stage with soiled napkins and the crusts of bread.

But the small women positioned the lute to her belly, leaning over the instrument like a mother with a child. The wood of the lute was thickly lacquered, the reddest wood he had ever seen, almost black, and the grain of the wood whirled in tiny pools upon its surface. This was an expensive instrument to be carting through the backwoods.

He sipped from his ale, letting it slide down his throat. He allowed his eyes to close halfway just as the woman on the stage strummed her first chord. The music seemed to cut through the chatter and settle in his ear, like a nesting bird. She repeated the chord, and the crowd began to settle, the voice of the lute drawing eyes back to the stage.

The bardswoman looked out, not to the crowd, but further, somewhere other than here. He watched her shift her fingers slightly on the neck of the instrument and the nails of her other hand strum down the strings. The new chord was a sister of the first. It echoed across the room as if searching for the first chord. The crowd settled to a silence, afraid to disturb this quest.

With the lull, the woman began to play. The sweetness of the music spread across the room, speaking of happier times, brighter times than the cloudy day that had just ended. The juggler watched her fingers dance across the wood and strings. Then she did the most remarkable thing: She began to sing. Her voice rose as a harmony to the other. Though he did not understand the tongue she sang, he sensed the meaning. She sang of years, of the turning of seasons, of the cycle that all life followed.

The crowd sat stunned in their chairs. One man coughed, and his neighbors glared at him while the rest stared slack-jawed toward the stage.

Subtly her voice changed, and the chords began to moan more than sing. She now warned of danger, of the time when the cycles of life are threatened. She sang of beauty destroyed and innocence shattered. Drums could be heard behind her voice and the strike of her chords.

The juggler found himself wanting to console her, to tell her all was not lost. He watched her fingers slow on her lute as her song shifted to a new rhythm, the beat of a fading heart. Slower and slower the chords stretched across the aching

room. Patrons leaned toward the stage, trying to keep her from stopping. But stop she did, a final brush of nail on string, then nothing. Only a single note of her voice held and hanging in the air. Then this too faded with her breath.

The room was deathly still. The juggler inexplicably felt a tear roll down his cheek. His hand did not move to wipe at it. He let it fall from his cheek. Many other eyes in the room too were wet and cheeks damp.

He expected this to be the end, but he was mistaken. A whisper of a chord began to drift from her lute, as if the lute itself were singing. The music wafted through the room, brushing the many moist cheeks. Then her throat sang the final passage, of one alone, of the last of the bright standing amidst the ruin. Her music drew further tears from the juggler, as if her song were specially for him. But he was also aware of the many others in the room touched by her music, other souls attuned to her rhythm. Then with her final chord, firm and clear like a bell, and with the last whisper of her song spoke, she offered them all one consolation. One word: Hope.

Then it ended. He watched her shift from her stool and stood.

The crowd took the breath it had been holding and released it in a rushing gasp. A murmur of surprise followed by clapping ensued. There was a rush to the stage to rain coins into her pan. Before he knew what he was doing, the juggler found himself standing before her pan and pouring the coins from his own pan into hers.



On sale in May

HEROES DIE

by Matthew Woodring Stover

Thinking his wife Pallas Rill is being held prisoner, the assassin Caine attempts a feat never done before—breaking into, then out of, the Ankbanan donjon. He comes across two of her companions and commandeers one of the enemy to aid their escape.

Standing by those double doors are nine very alert-looking men in full armor with crossbows at the ready and the hip-height stone wall of the balcony rail for cover—and no doubt with orders to hold that door with their lives.

I mutter, softly enough that no one can hear, “We are lip-deep in trouble.” Is it too late to change my mind about this stupid escape thing?

But, y’know, I’m an optimist. I can look on the bright side: at least we don’t have to cross the Pit floor below, with its surging mass of jeering, hooting prisoners. And better a quick death, choking on the blood that fills your lungs from a crossbow through the chest, than to be delivered alive into the Theater of Truth.

I slip back into the darkness to rejoin the others.

“Talann, you remember what I told you before, what you have to tell Pallas Rill if I don’t get out of here?”

Her face hardens and she shakes her head stubbornly. “No. No, I don’t, and don’t waste your breath telling me again. We all make it or none of us do.”

Idiot child. “Lamorak, listen to me.” His eyes are glazed, and he seems to be looking at something deep within the stone over my head. I shake him until his consciousness swims up into view.

“Lamorak, you have to tell Pallas she’s offline.

Understand? When you meet Pallas, tell her she’s offline.”

“Pallas?” he murmurs thickly. “Caine ... sh—Caine, I’m sorry ...”

He’s in a world of his own. “No time for that now. Listen to me: Pallas dies in three days, or maybe less, maybe only two. You hear me? Pallas dies!”

Lamorak frowns, leaning his head on the back of Rushall’s shoulder; I think some of this is drifting into view through the fog in his mind. But now Talann stares at me with an uncomprehending squint.

“What do you mean, Pallas dies in three days? Is she hurt? Poisoned? What does ‘offline’ mean?”

I bite down on my desperation and speak through clenched teeth. “Talann, I swear to you, if there’s ever a way for me to explain this to you, I will. But not now. For now, just accept my word.”

“I do, but—”

“Fine then. Lamorak, you got it? You have to tell her she’s offline.”

His brows slowly draw together. “Offline ... Pallas is offline? Bleeding God, Caine ... She’ll die!”

“Yeah.” Now she has two chances: if either one of them makes it, she might learn it in time to get to a fixed-transfer point and live. “All right, follow me.”

I lead them up toward the mouth of the corridor; we all stop just barely far enough in the shadows that the guards on the balcony opposite can’t see us.

“All we have to do is get to the Shaft door,” I tell them, pointing.

Talann's face hardens as she looks out there, but she says nothing. She understands as well as I do the brutal tactical reality of rounding that long open curve of balcony. I pull her back so that I can instruct her out of Rushall's hearing. We don't have to go far—it's as loud as a nightclub in here.

"Once we're through that door, we're home free. At the bottom end of the Shaft there's a sump, just a hole in the stone that they drop bodies down. It's a long drop, but the bottom is full of a couple yards of crap and composting corpses on a ledge. An underground stream flows right by there. That's how we get out. Understand? Jump in and don't swim. Just hold your breath and let the current carry you while you count to sixty like this: one-ankhana two-ankhana three-ankhana. Then swim for the side—the stream is narrow. Just swim hard and you'll bump into stone eventually. Keep hold of Lamorak—he can make a light. You'll be in the caverns under the city. If I'm with you, everything will be fine—I know those caverns. If not, keep moving upward and calling out. You should be able to meet up with the Subjects of Cant—they use the caverns to move around under the city."

"How do you know all this?"

"I know a lot of things about this city. It's practically my home town."

We go back up to where Rushall leans weakly on the wall, sagging under Lamorak's weight.

"All right," I tell them, "here we go."

Rushall whimpers, tears leaking steadily from his eyes.

"Relax, kid. Once we're inside the Shaft, we won't need you any more. And we won't have any reason to hurt you, all right?"

He nods uncertainly, not really reassured.

"Lamorak, we need something from you again here, magic to keep those guards busy while we cross the Pit."

His breath rattles in his throat for a second or two before he whispers his answer. "...I, I got nothing left. I think ... Caine, sorry ..."

Yeah, that would have been too easy.

"All right," I repeat, "let's try it this way. Hands and knees. Stay below the balcony wall and get as far as you can."

"Call that a plan?" Talann says. "Ever try crawling in a robe?"

"Deal with it. You lead. Give me those bows. I'm bringing up the rear."

She hands me the crossbows and the two quivers, and begins knotting her robe up around her hips. Rushall whimpers, "I can't do it. Please. I can't make it."

"... can crawl," Lamorak offers dully. "Don't need him for that ..."

"No you can't and yes you do. And you," I point a crossbow at Rushall. "I'm not interested in your problems. You start to feel too tired, just imagine how you'll feel with this quarrel sticking out your rear. Move."

Rushall flinches away from me with more energy than I've seen since I forced him into this job, and I turn to Talann. "When you get to that door, don't wait for me. Just open the thing. I'll be right behind you."

They set out with painful, nerve-racking slowness, creeping into the light. Pressed against the wall with a bow in each hand, I hang back in the shadows and watch the nine guards across the Pit.

Three minutes, that's all I ask. Tyshalle, if you're listening, if you're there, give me three minutes and I'll get us out of this.

Talann's already out of my line of sight. Rushall's right behind her, crawling close to the wall, Lamorak riding him like a baby chimp clinging to his mother's back.

I hold the crossbows upright, pointed vertically on either side of my head. Their weight makes my shoulder start to ache. When I shift my balance a knife of pain jabs into my right knee. I hope to God I can run. I start a breathing routine and dull the pain with one of the meditative Control Disciplines I learned all those years ago at the abbey school.

The Shaft door stands closed and silent in my gaze. As soon as that door starts to move, or the guards give any sign of alarm, I'm gonna jump out, fire both bows to get their attention and sprint for it. Maybe I'll get lucky and drop one. A target moving at the speed I can run, across the thirty meters of the Pit's diameter, will be nearly impossible to hit.

Or, I should say, at the speed I could run this morning. My knee feels like it's being slowly crushed in a vise.

I only hope none of these guys can shoot like Talann.

No sign of alarm, yet. This is going to work. We're going to make it.

And I, I confess, am loving this.

This is what I live for. This is why I am what I am. There is purity in violence, in the desperate struggle to pull life from death, that surpasses any philosopher's serene quest for truth.

All bets are off now, all rules suspended: no more greyscale wandering through the moral fog of real life—this is elemental, black and white, life and death.

And even life, even death: they have little meaning for me now. They are only outcomes, consequences, vague peripheries. The violence itself consumes me, even in anticipation. When I step out from my cover, stake my life and the lives of my friends on my gift of slaughter, the caustic tide of mayhem will wash me with grace.

Rushall interrupts my poesy by suddenly standing: he pops up behind the wall like a paper target in a shooting gallery. He's holding Lamorak's arms to keep the swordsman on his back—Lamorak looks like he's out cold. Faintly over the din I can hear Rushall's panicky scream:

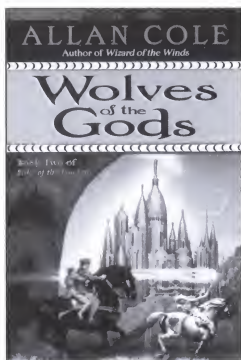
"Don't shoot! Don't shoot! I've got one!"

Did I say we're lip-dip in trouble? Make that: up to our eyeballs.

HEROES DIE

**MATTHEW
WOODRING
STOVER**

On sale in August



WOLVES OF THE GODS

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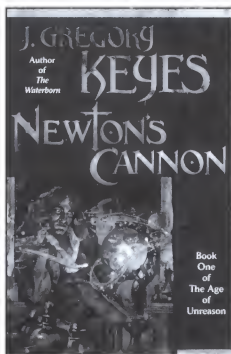
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For more information on *Newton's Cannon* and other books by J. Gregory Keyes, check out the Del Rey Web site at:
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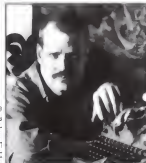
JAMES CLEMENS

James Clemens was born in Chicago, Illinois, in 1961. With his three brothers and three sisters, he was raised in the Midwest and rural Canada. There, he explored cornfields, tadpoles, and frozen ponds, dreaming of worlds and adventures beyond the next bend in the creek.

Eventually, forced to grow up, he went to school at the University of Missouri, where he graduated with a doctorate in veterinary medicine in 1985.

During one especially icy Midwestern winter, the lure of ocean, sun, and new horizons eventually drew him to the West Coast where he established his veterinary practice in Sacramento, California. Presently, he shares his home with two Dalmatians, a stray Shepherd, and a love-sick parrot named Igor.

A spinner of tales since his childhood, *Witch Fire* is his first novel.



MATTHEW WOODRING STOVER

Current Occupation (other than writing fantasy novels): Bartender at the LockerRoom Club in Chicago's United Center, a private club for season ticket holders for Chicago Bulls and Blackhawks games.

Hobbies: I'm a recreational marathon runner (Chicago '96 and Dublin '97) and an amateur kickboxer. I have studied a variety of martial arts, including the Degerberg Blend, tae kwon do, aikido, English boxing, English quarterstaff, the Filipino sword arts kali/escrima/arnis) and muay thai. Other than that, I read a lot of SF and fantasy, history, some philosophy, go to a lot of movies, play a variety of RPGs—and I write fantasy novels. I list that as a hobby because I do it for fun, for my own personal satisfaction—I wrote fantasy novels for many years before I ever got paid for it, and I'd still be writing them, even if I'd never sold one.



ALLAN COLE

Allan Cole is a bestselling author, screenwriter, and former prize-winning newsman who brings a rich background in travel and personal experience to his imaginative work. Raised in Europe and the Far East, Cole attended thirty-two schools, visited or lived in as many countries, and from an early age made a point of observing everything very closely for future reference. He recalls hearing *The Tempest* for the first time as a child sitting on an ancient wall in Cyprus, the island Shakespeare had in mind when he wrote the play. Rejecting invitations to become a CIA operative like his father, Cole became an award-winning reporter and newspaper editor who dealt with everything from landmark murder cases to thieving governmental officials.

Since that time he's written fifteen novels, many of which had become international bestsellers as well as numerous screen and television dramas. He currently lives on a ranch in Boca Raton, Florida, with Kathryn, his strongest supporter, and "Squeak," the cat who rules writer elves.



J. GREGORY KEYES

Born in Meridian, Mississippi, J. Gregory Keyes spent his early years roaming the forests of his native state and the red-rock cliffs of the Navajo Indian reservation in Arizona. Storytelling in his family and on the reservation sparked an interest both in writing and the ancient. He obtained a B.A. in anthropology from Mississippi State University. Moving to Athens, Georgia, he worked ironing newspapers and as a night guard to support his wife, Nell, in her metalworking degree, and began writing seriously in his spare time.

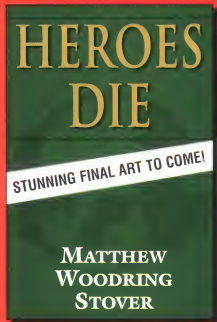
Returning the favor, Nell worked Greg through a Masters in Anthropology, the coursework for his Ph.D., and the writing of his first novel, *The Waterborn*. His particular interests in Anthropology—belief systems and mythology—continue to inspire his fiction.

Greg and Nell now live in Seattle, Washington, where Nell pursues her Masters degree and Greg writes full time. In leisure moments, he enjoys ethnic cooking. Restricted now by geography from playing his favorite sport—Kapucha Toli, a Choctaw game involving heavy sticks and few rules—he has taken up foil fencing.



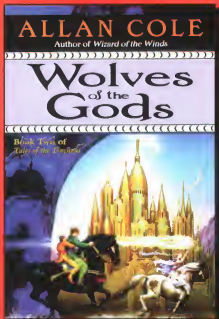
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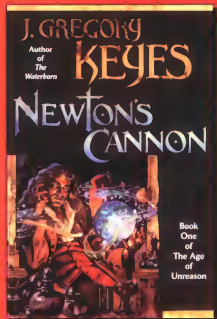
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of my grasp, something powerfully present and then—

—then it was beyond the fingertips, something hurtling away, out of the room, gone, gone as suddenly as it came, a being now beyond the walls. I wanted to cry out to stop it, to bring it back. But I wanted to utter something, too, some mundane formula, some cliché to make what had just happened unreal. To make the thing disappear forever as if it had never come. I wanted to cry because there was now a great sadness in its wake.

Where was the sadness? I could not find it in Margaret or Lenora or my own biological mother flying out of the iron lung someplace, these women having been sustained by the power that now rushed on, on beyond the walls and across the cliffs and through the hills and the woods and over the horizon. I could find the sadness only in me—me, and what was left of me here, pacing back and forth like that bitter crazy old man who'd passed his life away at Windy Pines Residence Center.

I looked into her eyes, willing to let her see the tears and the me inside. The soft and vulnerable me inside.

She whispered: "I didn't look for my brother because I was young at first. But even then, I didn't look for my brother because I knew he would come here someday. I knew he would be led to me."

"Led by what? Despair?"

She shrugged as if I knew. "With you here—and you will come again, I hope—no, I'm sure—with you here, I cannot even imagine what despair would be."

Oh, but I could feel it. Imagine withdrawing your fingertips just in that moment when ecstasy was possible, just before you touched the face of the divine.

She said, "Come again, Hank. Any time. Come again and revel."

I turned away, feeling angry for some reason.

She whispered: "And on your way down, go to the juniper tree just off the road at the bottom of the cliff."

I am not telling you you should have hope. That is not what I discovered.

I very nearly tumbled off the ridge heading down the road into the treetops. I very nearly purposely tumbled, and had to stop and catch my breath, and the tears flowed—I know that sounds melodramatic—but damn it, be in my place for a moment.

There was a clippity-clippity-clippity in the woods beside me, below me. Behind me. Clippity-clippity-clippity, the shoes of a thousand ghosts running. The hooves of a single beast, of whatever had been in the room with us, of the beast come back. Why? To kill me with its razor-sharp horn? *Fine, fine, do it! Do it! I would do it to you!*

Clippity-clippity-clippity: louder, and then off into the woods. Louder, and off into the woods. Louder—ghosts coming, coming closer—but I wasn't afraid. I hated my life too damned much to be afraid. I was angry. And I ran in anger—anger at Margaret and Bob Delashmit and Mrs. Hoffmann—I ran in anger and a screaming frustration and finally stumbled to the bottom of Mulberry Cliffs, and stood looking into the black forest. Stood looking and looking and looking, and feeling like I could have done what she, Lenora, had intended to do—murder someone, murder a boy—only I could have really done it, really done it, because I was just so damned full of doubt and hate, especially now, now that I could have reached out for happiness and couldn't do it, couldn't do it, couldn't be happy—or fucking live life with gusto—because that old man Bob

AND THE UNICORN WAS
COMPELLED BY AN
INEXORABLE FORCE TO SET
HIS HEAD IN HER LAP, HER
WARM MADONNA-MOTHER-
MAIDEN LAP. UNICORNS ARE
SO COMPELLED, FRIEND.

Delashmit had very nearly killed me once, and had not given me the love of a father and instead taught me to be filled with the bitterness of mundanity, of being happy with the mundane and the dry and the lifeless, and they all had done that, Bob Delashmit and Mrs. Hoffmann and my teachers and my fellow students and then my own students—they all taught me the bitterness of mundanity, and how to be nothing but some lifeless mundane thing and how to hate life so much that I feared giving up the old to really live, losing the dirt to be somehow cleansed; they taught me how to hate, not so as to end up a wife-beater or a child-murderer, but something as pitiful—something meaningless. Something without the power of real life.

Clippity-clippity-clippity clippity. Into the woods toward the tree, and then circling away. The tree? Could I go there, too?

No!

Clippity-clippity-clippity-clippity and then a cool sparkling breeze and goosebumps across my arms, and a fear, a fear, a driving white fear of being anything different than what I was! But the door to that had already opened, hadn't it, looking through aged newspaper strips at the illusory truth, at the magic of maya-like delusion? Oh, God, do not let me rush toward that tree!

Clippity-clippity-clippity of ghosts! And I ran, ran through the woods directly to the juniper, knowing where it was as if I'd been here once in some past age, and I grasped it, and its sap ran all over me, sap, running to the ground like blood. I held on, held on, but turned and saw at my feet the open pit where she'd dug the thing out. It was empty and could do me no good! The healing unicorn bones were no longer here!

Clippity-clippity-clippity and a rush of wind in a wide circle. How do you catch a unicorn? How do you catch a unicorn?

Clippity-clippity-clippity: Closer and closer, but slower now. Clippity-clip-clip-clop. And it stopped.

And I sat down there beside the open hole where once my bones should have been and indeed had been all this time by way of rumor and newspaper-truth. And I sat.

I sat. I sat, cross-legged, feeling what was offered me.

I sat feeling the mighty silent rush of wind in everything there: in the still branches and the interiors of trees, in the sky poking here and there into black forest, in the soil she'd piled up digging, in the silence of the hole in me. The still silent hole in me.

The still silence.

And the gentle beast, the very solid gentle beast, lay its head in my lap, too. And I stroked his mane and the beat beat beat of his heart did not stop, did not stop beating.

I am not telling you there should have hope. That is not what I discovered. Rather, there is a bubbling up of some thing: a spirit, a place, a time, a thing, a creature, a garden where hope and hoped-for are fused. It bubbles up in strange places overabundantly, despite the suffering, despite the penal system and the bad marriage and even the electric chair or the iron lung, bubbles up here and now to force stale, tired mediocrity out of even velvet paintings or mobile home bedrooms, to sparkle like stars not just fancy glitter, like stars in people who yearn for and dream of the unicorns, in people who paint them or sculpt them or people, who with the humility of making themselves silent beneath a juniper tree, write or read and thereby invoke and invent the unicorn. ♣



Sometimes it's hard to know if you're the hero or the Hero.
The only way to be sure is to step into the river.

Egyptian Motherlode

BY DAVID SANDNER & JACOB WEISMAN

Illustration by Michael Gibbs

THE PROPHET WORE AN OLD PLASTIC SHOWER curtain with a hole in the middle, hand-painted green with blue stars and crescent moons, draped over his head like a poncho. Most of his band had left the stage, except for a drummer pounding a deep, simple beat and a guitar player wearing a wedding dress and dark glasses. Early on there had been about 15 guys on stage, some horns, keyboards sampling ocean surf or planes landing, a bass, a group of drummers, and a bunch of guys trading off guitar riffs and backup vocals. Others just stood around wearing gold-spangled turbans and purple robes. An eight-year-old boy, brought out by a group of dancers, stood amid the chaos blowing bubbles.

They had played some good, loud dance beats early on, but with weird lyrics about outer space, the Egyptian pyramids, and the Bermuda triangle, then the Prophet had motioned members of the band off piece by piece until the loud dance beats dwindled to a pulse, and the Prophet, who had been dancing and waving his arms, sat cross-legged, then curled up in a ball at the far edge of the stage, whispering into his microphone. A dim red spotlight reflected on his thigh-high mirrored-silver boots and day-glo black laces. Sweat glistened off his face and arms and, shirtless beneath the shower curtain, on the fat rolled up over the waist of his black stretch pants. Orange feathers tied into his dreads fell forward onto his thin gray beard. He wore dark sunglasses even in the thick smoky blackness of the club. I had never seen anything like him before in my life.

The music was called Funk, which my brother said had died about 15 years ago. The band was Egyptian Motherlode, at least that's what they were called now. They'd had a bunch of names, rotating members, and a couple of regional hits along the Eastern Seaboard back in the '70s. That's what their bass player told me anyhow. His name was Eric. He wore a brown trenchcoat, T-shirt, spandex shorts, and bright, pink hightops.

I stood off-stage with Eric and my brother A. J. watching the

Prophet. My brother and I were half a rap group, Crushed Ice, which was supposed to have been on stage an hour and a half ago, except Egyptian Motherlode wouldn't get off, their dance numbers extending through chorus after chorus, and now the Prophet droned on unintelligibly. Suddenly straightening the microphone, the Prophet's voice became clear in a harsh, amplified whisper:

"The time has come to speak of something far more deeply interfused," the Prophet said. "A Funk Sublime — a motion and a spirit that impels and rolls through all things — where every groove belonging to me as good belongs to you."

My brother groaned and shook his head. Toward the back of the club patrons were starting to get up and walk away.

The time has come, the Prophet said, to speak of all unspeakable things — why the darkness is boiling hot and whether pigs have wings.

He vocalized low, pulsating hums, sometimes crying out, sometimes falling silent. I could see Rat, part of the other half of Crushed Ice, at the back of the club, outlined in the doorway, trying to chase customers back to their seats. I had known him only about a week and a half. Our agent back in Oakland, Bobby Times, had put my brother and me in with Rat and Desmond just for the tour. None of us was happy with it. Now, opening night, by the time we got up on stage, if we got a chance to get on stage at all, there wouldn't be anybody left to play to. I didn't know where Desmond was, probably talking to the manager, trying to make sure we got paid whether we played or not, whether there were customers or not.

The Prophet made a low hum or growl that made the hair on the back of my neck stand up.

Funk is the sweet voice — Funk the luminous cloud — all melodies the echoes of that voice — all colors a suffusion from that light.

"Tell it like it is," Eric shouted. Although the way he said it, dull and flat, I could tell his heart wasn't in it. When I talked to Eric before the show he'd been in awe of the Prophet. Now he didn't seem so sure.

"Nobody wants to hear this shit anymore," Desmond said, com-

I was fascinated by the book. And in the end I devote my full attention to it, afraid to risk

ing up behind us. "Get him off the stage. It's embarrassing."

I didn't like his tone. He was desperate. A bead of sweat ran down his temple. He wore a black beret, a tan button-down shirt, green fatigues, and black boots. He towered over Eric and me.

"Look, man, people are leaving. The manager isn't going to pay us if everybody leaves."

I looked out at the audience. A minute ago there had been around 20 people, now there were six. Rat joined us. He had his hair tied up into stubby tails of red and green rubber bands. He put his hand on Desmond's shoulder. Desmond's face was red. He was blinking rapidly and his hands wouldn't stop shaking.

"This is our shot," Desmond said. "This is it."

"Shit," Rat said.

I have touched the fire flowering from the sun, the Prophet said, sitting up, *and felt the Martian darkening wave pass beneath my feet — and I have swum the gaseous sea of Jupiter — but it meant nothing to me — for I have been where Alpha, the sacred river, ran down to a sunless sea — where the gardens bright with sinuous rills blossom many an incense-bearing tree — and seen the Red King asleep and dreaming of me.*

The room burst with white glare and we had to shut our eyes. When we opened them again the Prophet stood there on stage, the microphone limp in his hands. He let the mike drop to the floor and walked off-stage in our direction.

Desmond stepped in front of him as he passed. Eric grabbed Desmond's wrist but he shook him off. Rat and A. J. had to hold Desmond back. I stood between them and the Prophet, my hands up, warding, wondering what I would do if Desmond got loose. He was the biggest of us and right now the veins in his neck stretched out in long purple tracks from the top of his chin to below the line of his shirt. A. J. whispered, harsh and quick, in Desmond's ear, but he shook his head, no.

"Let him go," said the Prophet. We all turned in surprise as if we'd forgotten he was there. Rat and A. J. loosened their grip and Desmond leaned forward, menacing. The Prophet touched his hand. Desmond started as if shocked by static electricity. His face, first surprised, drooped.

"It's my fault," the Prophet said. "We played too long."

"This is our shot," Desmond said. "All we get."

The Prophet turned and walked off, followed by the guitarist in the wedding dress, and then Eric. I let out a breath I didn't know I was holding.

"All we get," Desmond repeated, more to himself than to any of us. A. J. nodded, but Desmond didn't look up. He put his face in his hands and started to cry.

THAT NIGHT I DREAMED OF WAKING, CROUCHED beside a man laid out on a table. I thought it was a hospital and the man an etherized patient, but he was dead and the table was made of stone. The white-haired man was laid out in ceremony with silver pitchers full of amber fluid and gold platters piled up with molding bread. I dreamed of a river, a great black river, slow-moving and inexorable, overflowing the banks of my imagination.

AFTER LAST NIGHT'S DISASTER, WE'D BEEN ON THE ROAD ALL DAY, driving under gray skies, not talking at all, Desmond and A. J. taking turns at the wheel. I was still too young to drive and Rat seemed too tired. I slouched in the back seat reading a faded, tattered copy of Richard Leakey's *Origins Reconsidered*. The back cover showed the paleoanthropologist sitting at his desk in a shirt and tie, his

sleeves rolled up, examining a skull with a protractor as he scribbled notes onto a piece of paper.

Rat and Desmond teased me about the book, until I told them it was about dinosaurs. The two of them exchanged knowing glances. I had, after all, just turned 14. But the book wasn't about dinosaurs at all. It was more a rambling discussion of the evolution of human thought based upon evidence supported by the fossil record. Richard Leakey, I was discovering, was more a philosopher than an anthropologist. He was more concerned with what it all *meant* — the evolution of mankind and the confluence behind the origin of intelligent thought — than with the digging up of rare bones.

I was fascinated by the book. And in the silence, I felt compelled to devote my full attention to it, afraid to risk looking at anyone too closely. The dark sky pressed in, seeming about a foot above the roof, making me slouch deeper into my seat. My neck hurt.

Rat slept beside me on the back seat, drooling. He wore oversized jeans and a black T-shirt. His face, even asleep, looked worried. Sometimes he put his head on my shoulder, his arms crossed on his chest. Sometimes he snored, his mouth open and his eyelids fluttering. As we pulled up to the theater in Five Falls for a two-night run, the sky opened up at last, all at once, and it began to pour. Water filled the streets, running along the gutters, splashing beneath the tread of our tires.

The theater had a long row of scuffed, black-painted doors up front. One was propped open. A small ticket window to the right had a black curtain pulled down. Fronting the second story, in dirty green plastic letters on a field of dirty white plastic, the theater's sign spelled out:

EGYPTIAN MOTHERLODE
w/ CRUSHED ICE

"Oh, man," Desmond said, slapping the dashboard. "Our names should be up top. We're headlining. Bobby promised."

The Motherlode bus was parked down the street. The hood was up and smoke filtered out into the rain. Eric and a couple of the other band members stood on the sidewalk seeking shelter beneath the roof of a dilapidated building.

"Look at that old fossil," Desmond said, laughing.

The bus had been painted in haphazard smears of yellow-green-purple — some flowers, some moons, but mostly just a smear of color.

"Hey, Michael," Desmond said, turning back to me, "we found you a new dinosaur — check out Funkasaurus."

He waved his hand out toward the bus. I didn't say anything. Desmond frowned and turned around.

"Let's call Bobby," he said. "I'm tired of this shit."

Desmond and A. J. got out and headed for the open door. I rolled down my window when A. J. stopped at the door and turned around. "Don't go anywhere," he ordered, pointing at me, before turning back and going inside.

Eric, one hand in the pocket of his trenchcoat, the other holding a newspaper over his head, his collar turned up against the rain, walked briskly down the street to me.

"How's it going," he said.

"Not much," I said. "I mean, fine."

He reached into an inside pocket and pulled out a small, thin book.

"The Prophet said to give this to you."

silence, I felt compelled looking at anyone too...

"I don't even know the Prophet."

"He said you might enjoy it."

I took the book and wiped water drops from the cover. It was a tiny Xeroxed pamphlet. In cursive, the title read: *Interpretations of the Egyptian Book of the Dead*. Below that was written Motherlode Connection. There was also a drawing of a pyramid with an eye at the top, like on a dollar bill.

"I don't know, Eric."

"No, man, keep it. Check it out."

I flipped open the book. A neat handwriting covered the pages, next to sketches of mythological figures and hieroglyphs.

Rat had woken up on the seat behind me. He rubbed his face. Seeing Eric, he sat up and glared, finally getting out of the car and heading into the theater out of the rain.

"I better take off," Eric said, standing under the awning of the theater long enough to shake out his newspaper. "I'll see you tonight at the show."

He trotted off toward the bus.

I SAT BACKSTAGE, MY ARMS ACROSS THE BACK OF A metal folding chair, staring at my reflection in the splintered surface of the dressing room mirror. A large crack ran from the top to the bottom directly in front of me so that I looked like I had two faces: a small shriveled face on the left, and on the right, a face more recognizably my own, only older and haggard, already tired of living out of suitcases piled in the back of Desmond's Oldsmobile.

"It'll get better," Rat said. "At least we'll get to play tonight." He paused. "We'd better."

Desmond sat in the corner, lifting dumbbells, his veins rising deep purple. He wore tight jeans, top button undone, and a tan tank top. He grunted with each repetition.

The Motherlode tested the acoustics of the new theater. Muted sounds, a sharp, gritty guitar riff, the beat of drums, the feminine voices of backup singers, filtered into the tiny room. Rain tapped at a high window left open. Water trickled down the wall from the window into cracks in the concrete floor. Cold air touched the back of our necks and turned our breath to mist. A.J. had gone for a walk.

"Keep your head up," Rat advised me. Desmond rolled his eyes at the ceiling and walked out.

"Sure," I said.

I wiggled my head side to side, watching my head change shape in the mirror or kaleidoscope into multiple images.

Most of the time, Rat's eyes were dull, a calm, inappropriate blue. He would appear preoccupied, as though he monitored events occurring far away behind his eyes. Other times, his presence in a room was full. Right now, his concentration was directly focused.

I looked away, unwilling to meet his stare.

"The Prophet says he's been to Venus," I said, changing the subject. "The Prophet," Rat told me, "is crazy." Perhaps the Prophet was the wrong subject. Rat turned away.

"Rat," I said. "Don't worry about me. I'll be fine."

He didn't turn around, just looked at the door. In the mirror, his eyes were closed and I could tell he was concentrating.

"Stay away from Eric," he said at last. My mouth dropped open. I felt betrayed somehow, but I remained silent. "I mean it."

"He's my friend."

"He's in the Prophet's back pocket," Rat said. "You can't trust him. You can't trust any of them."

"Look," I began, but he must have heard the hurt in my voice, the

bewilderment. Here I was, supposedly on my own, just me and my brother, away from home for the first time and already I was being ordered about, told who I could and could not associate with.

"Just be careful," he warned me. "That's all. These guys were into all kinds of things back in the '70s. Ask Eric about Lamond Henderson some time, why he doesn't tour with the Motherlode any more?"

"I don't know anything about that."

"I know," he said. "Just be careful."

WE FINALLY GOT OUR CHANCE TO PERFORM later that night. The Motherlode ran through a short set and yielded the stage to us almost before we were ready.

We stormed the stage at once. Rat and Desmond clapped their hands together to get the crowd going as my brother set up the turntable. "Hey, Eve Falls, all right," Rat shouted into the microphone. The crowd cheered. Then the bass kicked in, vibrating the entire stage. The lights faded out and we were engulfed by a swarm of swirling, saucer-shaped, red and green lights.

"Let's do it," Desmond yelled. A pair of jazz horns blared through the heavy bass, plaintive and enticing. Then Desmond ripped off a scream as we all did turns doing push-ups around each other — a game of human three-card monte. At last, Desmond stood, started to rap.

I'm blacker-meener-keener

I'm an unbeliever

I'll rip your heart out

He was really into it tonight, flashing anger, sweat streaming down his face. He circled the stage like a wounded tiger, not quite human. He seemed to believe every word he said.

I'm meener-keener-keener

I'm a savage deceiver

You'll never see me coming

I spotted Eric sitting with the Prophet at a side table, looking mildly amused. They had their elbows firmly planted against the table top.

I'm the midnight walker

The back-alley stalker

The last sight you'll ever see

The Prophet ignored a large, dark purple drink in front of him, his hands spinning as he attempted to convey something complicated to Eric. In a loose circle around them, a woman in a red jumpsuit sat making something — a giraffe? — out of playdough, a couple kissed in a tangle of red and black robes and dreadlocks. A man in a Dr. Seuss hat leaned in, nodding at every word the Prophet said.

Rat and I danced over each other, back to back, arms locked, pulling each other over faster until I felt dizzy. Desmond ended his song bent into the mike and shouting.

I'm the last sight you'll ever see

What you needed me to be

You'll never see me coming

Rat introduced me next. I wasn't ready. My first number, a dinosaur rap, "Brontosaurus on Main Street," just didn't work, not after Desmond. It hadn't seemed so jarring, and stupid, in rehearsal. I felt wrong, foolish and exposed, and that made things worse. I cut my set short and everything felt half-finished. Rat picked up though, doing an extended set to fill out the show, ending with his jazz-inspired, "Variations on Langston Hughes, or a Raisin in the Microwave," which I liked a lot. Desmond and I traded off improvising some strong dance moves to end it, A.J. laying down some deep grooves, definitely influenced by the bass of Egyptian Motherlode, not that he'd admit to it.

When the lights came up, though, Eric and the Prophet were gone. I looked for Eric backstage but couldn't find him anywhere.

AFTER THE SHOW, A.J. AND I TOOK A \$15 ROOM AT a rundown motel. Desmond and Rat slept in the car. I called home. My mother asked if I felt homesick. I didn't say yes, I said "Sometimes." Big mistake. She said, why not take the next bus, she'd pay for it and pick me up at the station. I couldn't stand it. I listened, flushed, embarrassed. Then she got A.J. on the phone and yelled at him.

"Oh, Mom," he said.

The figure bent forward into the light, hands I screamed. He had fangs and his large, cold

He said we'd be back in the Bay Area, in Oakland, in two weeks and even said she could come to the show. He hated that.

"Yes, I'm watching out for him."

"No, nothing like that, I promise."

"OK."

"Goodnight, momma."

"Goodnight, momma."

"Goodnight, momma."

After he hung up, A.J. paced around the room for awhile, clearly, by the expression on his face, not wanting to talk to me. Finally, he did some push-ups and went to bed. I sat up late in bed, reading the book the Prophet had given me until I fell asleep.

I AWOKE TO SOMEONE SPEAKING.

"What?"

"There is a certain way to walk this place. You must walk right foot lifted, knee bent under, foot turned out just so... forward only a half-step... head turned in... shoulders up so."

I sat up in bed. My nightshirt had twisted in my sleep, binding my right arm, choking me. I pulled at the collar. I coughed. The room felt warm, smothering. Smoke haze burned my eyes. I squinted. An ember glow backlit a figure by the door, tall, gaunt, moving slowly as if swimming the shadows. I felt ill, my ears buzzing, the pit of my stomach opening on nothing.

"Always this direction."

The scarecrow silhouette moved clockwise around the bed in a strange herky-jerky dance. "This is the direction of the wind around the world, of the beetles' dance at the Creation. This is the direction of the living returning from the land of the dead."

"Who is it?"

The figure bent forward into the light, hands reaching out to me. I screamed. His body, his hands, were human, but his head was too large with fur bristling along his muzzle. He had fangs and his eyes, his large, cold eyes, were inky night.

A.J. shook me and I fell back on the bed. Everything was quiet except a buzzing in my ears. There had been a drumming, I realized, loud drumming, but now it was gone.

"That's the third time tonight," A.J. said, his voice thick and angry, and rolled back to sleep.

I sat back in bed, not wanting to sleep, not believing I would ever sleep again. I was asleep almost immediately.

THE NEXT DAY, AT BREAKFAST, A.J. HAD CREAMY BAGS under his eyes. I asked him how many times I had woken him. This had been the second night in a row I'd kept him up most of the night. Sometime last night he had stopped trying to wake me when I screamed. He didn't look at me while he ate, just kept his head down the whole time. When he finished, he said that if I couldn't handle it maybe I should go home. I went for a walk instead. The day was overcast and dark.

I found Egyptian Motherlode's bus parked behind the theater. Eric came out to talk to me, and sat on the bottom step of the bus. Nobody else was around.

I asked him about Lamond Henderson.

He looked me up and down as if seeing me for the first time.

"Lamond was the Motherlode's first bass player, and the Prophet's brother," he told me. "Drugs played a big part in those years. I wasn't there, you understand." He looked uncomfortable.

"What happened to him?" I asked.

"Strange things can happen in your mind, things that are unbelievable. There are no words to articulate them, only the experience. It's like in dreams, only now it's all real."

I told him I wasn't sure I understood, but I was afraid I understood all too well.

"Back then nobody knew what the stuff could do," he said. "After gigs, the band members would play dare games with a salad bowl full of various drugs — acid, speed, all kinds of things. Nobody ever knew what was in there. That night Florence, a backup singer, still with the band, took what might have been about three tabs of acid. She told me the story. Star Baby took four and some other things; the Prophet took more. Lamond took nearly a whole handful of stuff, enough to kill somebody."

"Florence spit hers out. Lamond, though, swallowed all of his. He started hallucinating. The Prophet tried to calm him down, but Lamond wouldn't have any of it. The hair on his body was standing up as if he'd received an electrical shock. He called out for his father, and turned away from the Prophet. By this time, he was hallucinating so badly that many of the people who were there claim they shared the illusion with him, even the ones who hadn't taken anything. They said they could make out an open coffin in which an elderly, white-haired man lay."

"I'm sorry," Lamond yelled, over and over again until his voice gave out. Finally somebody called security and they took him away. They had to leave him there in Montreal. He doesn't play for anybody now."

"I didn't know," I said.

"It's all right. I'm just glad you asked me and not somebody else."

I didn't know what to say. It all seemed too horrible, almost as if I'd been there myself.

"Tell Rat to watch his mouth," he said.

"There's something else," I said. "I want to talk to the Prophet." Eric didn't answer, just sat there waiting for me to say more.

"It's about that book. I saw... I don't know what I saw — a man... I didn't know how to describe the dreams. All I knew was that there were some pictures in the book that reminded me vaguely of the experience, of the way it felt. "... a wolf's head. Teaching me a dance."

Eric looked at me for a long time.

"I'll go get the Prophet," he said.

He motioned me on and pointed to the back of the bus where the Prophet stayed. The Prophet's bed, covered in a Guatemalan blanket, was suspended from the wall and ceiling, next to a table with incense and candles, and below shelves of books.

I thumbed through the books, reading passages of Ptolemy's *Almagest*, an astronomy text; the *Radiix*, a 19th-century astrology journal; Alexander Hislop's *Two Babylons*; Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, skimming past books on etymology, hieroglyphics, color therapy, African-American folklore, ex-slaves' writings; thumbing through the theosophical works of Madame Blavatsky, a spiritually channelled book called the *Book of Oahspe*; the selected poetry of Samuel Taylor Coleridge; *The Urantia Book*, a spiritual account of the history and nature of the universe; Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*; the Bible, and accounts of the origins of the Rosicrucians.

Eric didn't come back. I left to go find A.J. He'd be wondering where I was. Besides, we had rehearsal in the afternoon, and while I had waited the sun had come out.

I HEADED BACK TO THE ROOM. I FELT WEAK from lack of sleep and needed to splash some water on my face.

reaching out to me.... eyes, were inky night.

A.J. wasn't in the room, but I heard a noise in the bathroom. I walked in on Desmond. He was naked, on his knees in the shower. I started to apologize, backing up — then I noticed the syringe in his hand. My stomach dropped and my mouth suddenly felt as dry as if it were stuffed with cotton.

"It's nothing serious," Desmond said between tight lips and clenched teeth. "Not drugs. Steroids." Fear flickered in his eyes now. He stood up, placed the syringe filled with amber fluid on the sink and turned to face me. His stare was cold. I wasn't sure he recognized me. He seemed to look right through me.

He leaned over and brushed some lint off my shirt. His other hand was clenched. Muscles bulged with angry veins across his shoulders. He seemed to be waiting to see what I was going to do. I met his gaze, briefly, then turned my back to him and walked out.

I no longer needed to splash my face. I felt more alert than I'd been in over a week. Jesus. What was going on?

Desmond didn't show up at rehearsal, and no one saw him until just before showtime. We sounded terrible. Desmond wouldn't look at me, and he had no edge. Rat had no energy, like he didn't want to be there. Only A.J. seemed to be into it, spinning groove after groove, mixing smooth transitions.

The Motherlode, on the other hand, were starting to come together. They had the feel of their instruments again, and played like they meant it. Hardly anybody came to the show, though. I saw the Prophet walking around backstage after the show, talking to anyone who would listen, clearly excited, but I felt too shaken about Desmond to talk to anyone about anything. I avoided him by hiding in the bathroom until everyone had gone.

That night, the dreams were worse than ever.

I TOLD RAT ABOUT DESMOND'S YELLOW SYRINGE THE NEXT day, but he already knew. "It helps him perform, gets him angry," he told me. "Besides, if he doesn't take it he'll get stomach cramps. His skin will itch and he might throw up. He'll be all right." I wasn't convinced.

Now that I knew about the steroids, I began to see some of the other side effects Rat hadn't told me about. Desmond's hair had begun to thin. His back was streaked by a swath of red and purple acne sores. His face was smooth and bloated while the rest of his body was lined by a multitude of purple veins. There were other, deadlier side effects to watch out for as well. God only knows if his testicles had shrunk. I wasn't about to ask.

IN MY DREAM, I STOOD LOOKING AT MYSELF IN A MIRROR, cracked down the middle, dividing me in half, one half me and the other half unrecognizable, a distorted shadow or apparition. It was as if I was there and somewhere else, too, both at the same time. I could hardly stand up because of the heat. My throat was too dry to speak. Incense and smoke choked me and made my eyes water and blink. Behind me, I could see in the mirror, the silhouette of the wolf-dancer. I moved in rhythm to his movements, jerking like a string puppet. I coughed, my lungs searing, my vision smearing dark. I pleaded incoherently with him to stop. I was crying. I don't remember what happened next.

I AWOKE EVERY MORNING BATHED IN SWEAT, MY THROAT sore. I began to dream during the day, dozing in the car or napping backstage before the show. Dark bags sagged under my eyes and the skin on my face and neck looked blotchy. A.J. looked wiped out, too,

and he stopped talking to me except to tell me to stay in the car or get out the room during the day so he could sleep.

The car rides became like a trip to the morgue. Desmond hardly slept at all the whole tour, and kept Rat awake. Everyone sat in sullen silence or fell into deep, stiff-necked sleep, everyone except Desmond. Desmond did all the driving now. He was the only one who had any energy, but he was manic. During one gas station stop, when Rat and A.J. were out of the car, I watched him flip a hammer he'd found somewhere end over end from hand to hand, his muscles taut, his neck bulging. He flipped the hammer from the moment he stepped out of the car without stopping until it was time to drive again, then shot out into traffic. The attendant had watched Desmond's antics with horror and forgotten to charge us. I spent the next couple of miles looking over my shoulder, searching for a police car that never materialized.

Most of the time, Desmond wasn't so bad, except when he played chicken with the other cars on the highway dividers, laughing when we yelled at him. The other car always swerved out of the way at the last moment. He never stopped talking while we drove, often telling us how important the tour was, how we had to get it together.

Once, when no one else was around, Desmond offered me something to give me some energy. I declined, but I had to talk to the Prophet soon. Rat and A.J. had begun to wake me up in the car to keep me from talking in my sleep. They wouldn't tell me what I had said.

Whenever I looked for the Prophet, though, he was now here to be found. Even Eric seemed to be avoiding me. I saw him down at the end of a long street once, but he turned aside and by the time I got to the corner he was gone.

IN MUD CREEK, I SLIPPED OUT OF PRACTICE EARLY TO search the Prophet out. Egyptian Motherlode's dressing rooms were on the far side of the theater. I walked down a long, dim passage under the stage to get there. Someone in green fatigues came out of the darkness behind me, through a door I hadn't seen.

"Hey," he said. "Hey, hey, hey."

I started to run. Fleeing through a series of black curtains into a back room, I bumped into two large purple-robed men with star-spangled turbans and long beards shot with gray. They were part of Motherlode, but didn't play instruments, none that I ever saw. Bodyguards? I smelled the sickly sweet odor of pot, and something else I couldn't identify. In a far corner, a woman in loose, colorful pants sat on the floor doodling chords on an electric guitar. One of the men clasped my shoulders.

"Rock should not walk in the evening," he said, his smile widening into a grin. He nodded in agreement with himself.

"The Prophet," I said.

The man pointed. The Prophet sat alone, half out of sight behind a pillar, cross-legged on a large paisley-patterned pillow. I approached him. The Prophet wore red-tinted sunglasses, a kilt with spandex biker shorts underneath, and a white mesh tank top. He had on dirty red socks, sandals off and next to the pillow. As I came close, I saw the man in green fatigues kneeling beside him. He had been hidden by the pillar. It was Eric. He looked up at me, his eyes wide and staring; he was sweating. He reminded me of Desmond, only older. He moved away quickly out of sight into the darkness.

"Ah," the Prophet said, with regret. "You're lost."

I sat crossed-legged before him, my hands held out, but he spoke first.

"I have had a roomful of people out on the floor," the Prophet said, "listening to the drum hours at a time. No twitching, fidgeting, just straight into dream, just from the beat of the drum."

He reached out and pulled me close by the elbow. With his other hand, he tapped on my chest, two fingers thumping a beat.

"Like this. Like a heartbeat, life itself. The shamen knew. All the world knew once."

The steady thumping on my chest startled me. I thought, first, that it hurt, but it didn't. He tapped harder. Each beat made me start, each like the flash of a strobe. I felt the presence of the dancer, the

Behind me, I could see in the mirror, the silhouette I moved in rhythm to his movements, jerking

wolf-head dancer, behind me. I sat up afraid, the sudden heat overwhelming. The smell of incense, burned and pungent. A voice explaining. There was another figure there too, something large, stony, and olive brown. Its eyes glared fiercely as it observed the ritual.

"Then with arms above, supplicate to the sky, step to the edge of the circle, drop the hand into the river..."

The new figure dropped down on all fours. It had short, scaled arms and a hooked nose. It seemed to be looking past the Prophet, past me, searching for something, its head tilted upward as if it were trying to catch a glimpse of something just beyond the range of its vision. I grabbed the Prophet's hand. He had been speaking. Was it the same words as the dancer behind me? I could see the room again, the pillar at my side. But I felt calm now, sure of the Prophet.

"My first time was like an awakening," the Prophet said. "I could see the energy in my hand, moving in the grass, Celtic knots, mandalas of light. But wait awhile, you're young. Drugs can be too seductive, too much, too powerful all at once. My brother —"

"I know about your brother," I interrupted. I had to speak. "Did you think I wanted drugs?"

"I thought you were like the other one."

"Desmond?"

"Rat. He hasn't come for a few days. I thought he sent you."

My mouth dropped open. Rat?

"Ah," he said, "you're the dreamer, I remember. I was told you were coming."

"By who?"

"By Eric. Who did you think?"

I told him everything in a rush, everything about the dream, the dancer, even what I felt when he drummed on my chest, everything but the strange, stone figure. The Prophet seemed uninterested, distracted. He nodded when I finished. He stood up, straightening his kilt, slipping on his sandals.

"What should I do?"

"This dream is a Dream, a capital D Dream," he said. He began to move past me.

"What does that mean? Tell me. Why is this happening to me?"

"Wrong question. Let the dream complete itself. We will meet my brother in Oakland for the final show."

"I'm afraid to — I'm afraid to sleep."

The Prophet turned to me. I grabbed his hand, relieved. "You look tired," he said, "I can help."

WHEN I AWOKE, THE PROPHET, EVERYONE, WAS GONE. I didn't remember falling asleep. The Prophet had touched my forehead. My sleep was dreamless. I felt better. I could hear Motherlode playing, the Prophet wailing, vocalizing high-pitched trills echoed and reverberated through a sound box. A.J. must be looking for me, frantic by now. I stood up, uncertain, rubbed my face and headed for the front of the theater. Rat found me first.

"I need to talk to you," I said.

"No time. After," he said. He grabbed my arm.

"After," I said and let him lead me back to the dressing room.

I CONFRONTED RAT BACKSTAGE WHEN MY BROTHER and Desmond went to get our money.

"What are you doing with the Prophet?"

"What? Nothing. Who told you that? Not the Prophet, some of the other guys."

"You told me to stay away from them."

"I needed something for Desmond, something to keep him down, something to make him sleep. He doesn't sleep any more."

"This whole tour's a mess," I told him. "I can't go on like this. Desmond can't go on like this. He's going to hurt somebody. We need to make him stop."

"Yes, but not now. He'll pull through. We need to make the act work, at least by Oakland, or we'll have thrown everything away. The steroids keep Desmond going, but they're laced with amphetamines. We just have to accept it and concentrate on the act. Make it work. We can help Desmond later — if he wants our help."

I nodded, defeated.

"Bobby said some producers might be there."

Amphetamines, Jesus. Desmond might pull through all right, if he didn't have a heart attack first.

THE NEXT DAY I FOUND ERIC IN FRONT OF THE deli across the street from the theater, sitting on a lawn chair, smoking a cigarette, and eating a chili dog.

"What happened with the Prophet?" I asked. "Why have you been avoiding me?"

He looked up with a tired expression, motioned for me to sit at the foot of the chair, but I stood my ground. At last, reluctantly, he stood. His face was pinched around the eyes and he looked pained by what he was about to tell me.

"When I was in high school," he said, "I bought a single by a group called the Pathfinders. That's what the Prophet called his band back then. This was when Motown was at its height and the Beatles were still together and here's this record... this record about the quest for immortality in ancient Egypt, about black people being from Venus. There was nothing else like it I'd ever heard. I've been playing Funk ever since."

I nodded, not sure where he was going.

"When I got the chance, when the Prophet brought the band back together, I had to be a part of it, a part of those old 45s and what they used to mean to me. I've been with the Prophet for three years now, he's shown me all his books and helped me along as much as he's been able to, but I can't do it."

"Sometimes, when I take the drugs, I hear the drumming, but I never saw a wolf's head."

Not a wolf's head, I wanted to tell him, but a man's body. A man's body with a wolf's head. Not a mask, but the head of a wolf. And something else, too. A figure that looked for all the world like a tortoise.

"I'm sorry," I said lamely.

"Don't be. It's no blessing. It eats at the Prophet until he's not himself any more, until he can barely function."

Eric walked back into the deli to pay for his lunch. I thought about following him inside. But what could I do besides apologize again? Nobody saw the dream but me and the Prophet. What did it mean?

I headed back to the theater, my head down.

THE NEXT NIGHT IN MODESTO, AT THE JUNIOR COLLEGE, we had our best set of the tour so far. Desmond didn't seem as manic. Perhaps Rat had found something to calm him down, after all. My brother added some samples from the Motherlode's horn section. And Rat sang with intensity all night long.

But Desmond disappeared after the show, taking the arm of a young woman in a red halter top, and wasn't around the next morning. We waited in the car in the sun over an hour and were just get-

of the wolf-dancer. like a string puppet.

ting ready to leave him behind when he showed up. His shirt was torn in two places and his eyes were a bit glazed, but otherwise he looked OK. It was getting harder to tell with Desmond, what was up and what was down? He nodded in no particular direction as he slipped into the back seat.

That was it. No explanation, no words. It had been so long since he'd said anything to anybody that I wasn't sure he still functioned on that level. His manic energy had all but dissipated, and left him empty.

After we'd been driving for an hour or so, Desmond took off his shirt, balled it up, and placed it against the side window to use as a pillow. He was asleep almost immediately. The first time he'd slept in days.

I COULD FEEL THE RIVER BEFORE I SAW IT. IT rushed by smooth and dark behind the stage, winding out of a vague immensity, a darkness pierced by points of light, perhaps stars. Nobody took any notice of it, or seemed at all surprised. The river gurgled as it passed and lapped at the back of the stage, pooling behind the drummer. I smelled the sharp, cold smell of it.

The Motherlode was deep into their set, oblivious. The Prophet stopped singing and handed the mike to Star Baby. Star Baby wore thigh-high black leather boots, dark sunglasses, a propeller beanie, a large diaper, and gold chains. He wasn't singing, just talking in a deep, rolling voice, explaining the power of funk to move and heal and give visions, exhorting everyone to get up and join the dance of Creation, laughing often, sometimes breaking into chorus just long enough to get the crowd singing out loud while he spoke. Everybody was on their feet, arms waving and weaving, heads nodding to the beat, eyes sometimes closed to feel the vibrations moving up through their feet, into the pits of their stomachs, up their spines.

The nights on the road had all run together in a quick blur and here we were at last, in Oakland, playing at Crazy Eight's House of Rock — the big show. Desmond had called a meeting with Bobby Times, but nobody was really interested in whether or not I was there, so I'd skipped out to see the Motherlode play their set. A.J. had nodded, looking relieved, and reminded me to see Momma. I stopped by her table in the back to say hello as quickly as I could before heading for the front of the stage.

The place had been packed early. The Motherlode had started loud and gotten louder; the crowd, indifferent at first, had begun to shout out and whistle, and then to dance. The heat of the place had become stifling. The music, though, brought a kind of joy, a nervousness released by the dancing and the beat, but it only teased, making the crowd hungry for something else. They were waiting for the Motherlode to take things another step further, to the next level — if they could.

The beat, never wavering, only slowed, imperceptibly at first, as the night went on. While Star Baby spoke, the Prophet walked along the edge of the stage, eyeing the crowd, sometimes offering his hand and drawing someone up on stage — women in ripped jeans and teased hair; men in metallic shirts; a transvestite in full drag, a red feather boa around her neck; an old man in tie-dye who cried and hugged the Prophet. The Prophet had them dance in a large circle around Star Baby, joining many of the Motherlode who already danced — the purple-robed men in star-spangled turbans, some of the guitar players in mini-skirts and gold lame, the back-up singers holding remote microphones — everyone on stage except for the drummer, the keyboards, Eric, Star Baby and the Prophet. The

Prophet wore a yellow and brown dashiki, a wraparound hula skirt with cheap green plastic strands hanging down that didn't reach all the way around his pot belly, a three-pointed jester's hat, dark sunglasses, and pointed shoes that curled up at the end. Sweat dripped from his bare arms and scruffy, graying beard, and flew off his cheeks when he shook his head.

The Prophet smiled when he saw me, a big smile, and I couldn't help smiling back. He put his hand out to me and hauled me up onto the stage easily, with surprising strength.

"Michael, Michael," he said, "Oh, yeah, Michael."

He put his arm around my shoulder, gripping me tightly, urgently. He led me up to one of the dancers, a heavy-set man, his face expressionless, his movements stilted and mechanical. The man wore a white suit, with a white bow tie, gloves, and a top hat. He resembled the Prophet, only worn out and used up.

"This is my brother, Lamond," he said to me, patting Lamond on the back. He leaned in to his brother and shouted, "Lamond, this is Michael, he's going to help us go home."

"Home?" Lamond asked.

Beyond the other dancers as they ducked and whirled, I could see Desmond off-stage, his arms folded, waiting to make sure the Motherlode finished on time. I already knew they wouldn't. The Prophet seemed to be just getting things rolling, everything still rising toward some unknown release, a crescendo.

"The dance, show me the dance. Show us all the dance."

Suddenly, for the first time that night, I felt uncomfortable, even a little frightened. The Prophet must have seen the look on my face.

"It's all right," he said. "Take it easy."

He took off his sunglasses and I could see his eyes, bloodshot with bags underneath. When had he last slept?

"Michael, are you all right?" he asked. "I need you to concentrate. Now." His glare was intense, stern.

Behind him, I saw the ponderous, round shape of the tortoise climb out of the river and onto the stage. "He's here," I said.

"What? Who?" The Prophet looked toward the river, surprised. He didn't see anyone.

"The tortoise."

"Tortoise?" He turned back to me. "No, that must be your guide, your helper. Help me find the other one, the wolf. Show us... show me the dance."

The tortoise stood awkwardly on two legs, water dripping off his back and his white and yellow belly, his stumpy arms hanging loose at his sides. He cocked his head at me, then nodded.

I wasn't sure I could remember the complicated movements. I had never performed it alone, only with the dancer in half-remembered dreams.

Star Baby had stopped singing and the Prophet handed me the microphone. I hesitated for a moment, then I stepped into line with the other dancers.

"There is a certain way to walk this place," I said at last. "Right foot lifted, turned in just so, arms out..."

All the dancers turned to me, watching. Their movements, awkward at first, became more sure, as if they'd known the steps all along and needed only to be reminded. I repeated everything I'd learned. I repeated it twice. I dipped my hand in the rising river and poured the cupped water over my head. The dancers followed my lead.

The Prophet took the microphone, vocalizing a long trill, then whispering, "Yes, yes, yes," stepped into the center of the dance, his arms raised, his head tilted back. *The time has come, he said, to speak of something far more deeply interwoven. A Funk Sublime — a motion and a spirit that impels and rolls through all things — where every groove belonging to me as good belongs to you.*

Eric put his hand on my shoulder, grinning, caught up in the excitement. He had handed his bass to someone else so he could dance in the circle. He wore his brown overcoat, Bermuda shorts, and bright blue sandals.

"I hear it," he said, "the drum, it's talking. I hear it."

"Come to the river," I said.

Continued on page 84

It's always a pleasure to see Carrie Richerson in our pages, especially with a remarkable folk tale like this one.

JUANITO, THE MAGIC BEANS, AND THE GIANT

BY CARRIE RICHERRSON

Illustration by Web Bryant

Listen! Stop what you are doing and listen! You have asked me to tell you my story. I will tell it to you. Sit down and listen to me. I will tell you the tale of the artist who became a goddess:

Our people have become poor, we have been enslaved, but we have always loved our children. Our proud towers lie in ruins and we have lost everything, but our children are our treasures. When we were wealthy, when we were the rulers of all the lands, we gave our children great gifts. We gave them knowledge and maize and the tribute of many subject peoples. We sent them into the future to spy out our place there. Are we remembered? We asked. Are we honored?

Now it is all we can do to give our children the gift of life. I have seen a father starve himself so that his babies could eat. I have seen a mother sell her body to the hated conquerors for a bit of coarse cloth to keep her child warm. These are the actions of loving parents. These are the actions of the god in all of us.

I was given the name Mixel on my nameday; the hispanio priests renamed me Maria, after their god's mother. Among my people it is a great and terrible thing to take the name of a god, for one takes on that god's destiny with the name. The great king Topiltzin of the Tolteca was forced into exile after the god Quetzalcoatl entered into him; and the youth who would reign over our city each year as the personification of Tezcatlipoca during the Festival of Toxcatl, was sacrificed on the killing stone at the climax of the festival. But the white-skins take this matter of naming more casually than we do. It is one of the many ways they differ from us, as we learn daily to our sorrow.

Now I will tell you how I met Juanito. I had come to the curandera's booth in the great market of Tlatelolco for a potion. Many around me had fallen sick with the disease of pustulent sores; some had died. I had sold a painting of the Festival of Tlaxochimaco, the Offerings of Flowers, to a hidalgo, one of Cortes's captains. He had paid me generously, for in truth he had wanted to buy my body also. He had offered me sweet drinks mixed with pulque and pleaded with me, "Dona Maria, you are very pretty, and almost as light-skinned as I. Come with

me into my bedchamber and we will disport ourselves."

I cast my eyes down and drew my cape over my head. I told him that I could not, that I must go to confession, that the priest expected me. He let me go. "Next week, Dona Maria. Bring me another painting next week. I will show your work to the Great Captain Cortes himself. I am sure he will favor you."

I cast my eyes downward and went away from that place. In my mind I painted a new picture: the hidalgo stretched upon the Great Altar, and the priest offering his living heart to Huitzilopochtli. This vision, and the coins jingling in my purse, comforted me on my way to the market.

Even among slaves there must be trade, and the market of Tlatelolco, though smaller and poorer than of yore, still bustled with activity. I stopped at the incense-seller's booth first, and bought a tiny ball of copal. Though expensive, it is still available to us, for the Castilians care for nothing so much as gold. They are filled with lust for it; they are mad for it. They root after it like javelina rooting in the forest, and when they find it they grunt like pigs, too. "L'oro! L'oro!" they grunt and chuffle. May the gods save us from these barbarous people!



I entered the curandera's stall past baskets of mandrake root, dangling bunches of foxglove, and bundles of dried lizard skins. The healer-mother sat on a pile of deerskins in the midst of all the baskets and crocks, and ground chicalote seeds in a metate between her knees. From time to time she spat a stream of green juice from the herbs she was chewing into a jar at her elbow. A boy pranced and postured before her and she regarded him without favor.

"Ah, wise mother, so little a favor I seek, so great your power to grant it! See, I have earned five coppers as a porter for the white-skins' priest." The boy abased himself before the curandera. I saw that his back and legs were dotted with yellow and purple and I was ashamed to see a child of Tenochtitlan the Beautiful going dirty in the streets. Then my shame was replaced with horror as I realized the marks were not dirt but bruises. Who would beat a child?

The boy held the coins out to the witch-woman. "A small charm for my mother, please, sorceress. A little spell to make her beautiful forever, because I love her so much!"

The healer scowled at the boy around her cheekful of herbs and did not take the coins. I stepped up beside the boy and adopted the posture of respect for one's elder. "Who are you, child? And who is your mother, that this wise woman should make her eternally beautiful?"

The boy turned to show me the green eyes of one of the Noble Houses. "The name given me by the white-skins' priest at their ceremony of water is Juan, and I am not yet ready to reveal my true name. But I am a prince, and the son of a prince, and my uncle was a king. This city is my mother; someday I will rule here, and I will make Tenochtitlan great again."

The curandera clapped her hands over her ears, and I grabbed the boy and shook him. "Hush, child! It is folly even to joke about such matters! You never know when the conquistadors' spies may be listening!"

The boy slipped out of my grasp with a practiced shrug, but he did not run away. His voice was quiet and assured as he spoke to the healer, "You know, sorceress. You have the Sight. You know who I am."

The woman stared at the boy in silence for a long time. Something vast hovered over the three of us there, as though a god regarded us, and I did not dare move for fear. At last she spoke. "I am not a mage. I am only a healer. I see only a small boy who wishes to give his mother, whom he loves very much, a gift on her nameday." Without turning her head, she reached into one of the nearby sacks. "Here. This is what you seek. One for each penny."

She spilled five large, speckled beans onto the rug in front of Juanito. He frowned back at her. "I asked for a potion to make my mother young and beautiful, grandmother. I could not even make her a meal of five beans!"

"Only the god can make your mother young and beautiful again. Perhaps you should ask him, but he might require a great sacrifice for such a boon, and you have only five coppers. These are the magic you seek. They are not for eating. Plant them by the dark of the moon, and water them with tears and blood. They are a greater magic than: charm for beauty. They are freedom. But the price will be high, and these pennies are only the beginning."

"I hear your words, wise mother, and I thank you for your counsel." Juanito abased himself again, touched his forehead to the rug three times, then gathered up the beans and left. I stared after him, wondering what I had just witnessed.

"What freedom, grandmother?" I dared to ask. "What freedom can our people ever know again?"

The old woman looked directly at me for the first time, and something from her eyes, black as obsidian, skittered across my mind, like a skink skitters over the desert rocks. I flushed despite the early morning chill. "Freedom from fear, artist," she said. "Here is your potion against the white-skin pox. One silver coin."

I paid her with a trembling hand and fled.

A MAGE-WOMAN INDEED, TO KNOW ME SO DEEPLY! IN THE SHADOW of one of the Great Wall's arching braces, I stopped and tried to calm

myself. What else did the witch see, when she looked into my heart? Was I safe? Were my companions safe? Would the hispanio soldiers be waiting in my courtyard when I returned home?

O my listeners, you know: What is to happen has already happened, and I would learn my fate soon enough. I adopted the posture of humble acceptance and prayed to the gods that I would meet my destiny with courage, as befits a true Mexicana. The great stones at my back soothed me. I ran my hands over their smooth faces and imagined how I would decorate them. The conquistadors have forbidden us our great murals and public paintings, ever since the revolutionaries used the Wall to paint the story of their complaint against our masters and their intent to overthrow their rule. They showed the hated Hernan's head upon a skull rack, and ever since it has been death or amputation to draw upon the Wall, no matter how innocent.

In the month of the Serpent, one of my companions in the calpulli of artists ignored this, and paid a great price. She was fascinated by the horses of the Castilians; she sketched them whenever she could. She sought to do the gods honor by this.

Remember, O my listeners? When first the white-skins came to our land, we were puzzled by their strange appearance, and we were at first terrified of their great guns (until we understood that these were mere machines), but it was the horses that filled us with awe. We knew then that the white-skins must be powerful sorcerers indeed, to enchant gods to carry humans upon their backs. One day a horse stumbled and broke its leg. Its priest immediately cut its throat, and that night the Castilians feasted upon its flesh. Then we trembled in pity and awe, for who but a god would spill its blood and offer its flesh to feed its children?

My friend Tecalca was caught by the soldiers at dawn, as she finished a painting of a great stallion, rearing and breathing the flames of day, upon the Great Wall in the eastern quarter of the city. She was hailed before Cortes himself, who took pity on her youth and sex. "Your painting is not political in nature, so your sin is not as great. You will not pay with your life, but my law must be upheld," he said to her. To the guards he said, "Strike off her drawing hand and blind her in one eye. Mayhap she will still be able to get a husband thus." So it was done. My friend knew the gods had abandoned her. She hanged herself shortly thereafter.

Such a fate might await me, but I resolved to make myself free of fear, as the wise woman had said.

When I returned to my home, no soldiers awaited me. I prepared a stew of beans and salt-grass, with a little maize, for my meal, then I drank the potion of the healer. It was very bitter, but afterward I felt better. Then I burned the copal on my little altar. I cut my arm and let the blood run into a basin. I adopted the posture of supplication and prayed, "O Great Gods: Huitzilopochtli, Tlaloc, Chalchihuitlicue, Tezcatlipoca — hear the cries of your people! Disperse this pestilence that has fallen upon us!" My listeners, you judge if my prayers that night were answered!

NOW I WILL TELL YOU HOW I MET JUANITO'S BROTHER. ON THE LAST night of the old moon I left my house and stole through the deepest shadows to the courtyard of the bakers. In my bag I carried my paints, my brushes, my chalks. I had resolved to put aside fear, and now I had resolved to act.

On a visit to the bakery earlier in the day, I had spotted what I now sought: A great wagon piled high with many sacks of maize had been hauled into the city and parked beside the warehouse, against the Great Wall. (We have learned some things of use from the conquistadors — in this case, the wheel. Without it, these bags would have been hauled into the city upon the backs of porters, and taken directly inside the warehouse.) No doubt it would be unloaded on the morrow, but for tonight it provided perfect cover from spying eyes. I observed it in secret for a time and saw no watchman, so I

crept into the space between the wagon and the Wall, lit the candle inside my tiny lantern, and went to work.

My listeners, hear now what I drew upon the Great Wall, first the cartoon in chalk, then the painted figures: In the first panel, the god-king Tlaloc sat upon his golden throne, flanked by the sacred black jaguars. In his right hand he held his bone awl scepter, and in his left, the lightning bolt. Goggles decorated with bright shell and jade adorned his eyes, and he was crowned with a headdress of young maize tassels mixed with lightning bolts. Before him knelt, in the posture of profound supplication, a poor man and woman. They were gaunt with fasting, and their cloaks of maguey fiber were ragged, and the man carried the limp body of a sick child in his arms.

In the second panel, the god descended from his throne. He healed the child with his breath of life, and placed his own cape of quetzal feathers around the father's shoulders. He lifted up the mother and placed his own golden sandals upon her feet. In her hair he placed beautiful flowers, and he gave the couple gifts of maize and gold.

In the last panel the god cut his arm with his bone awl and sprinkled the sacred blood over the couple. The jaguars licked their hands, thereby promising joy and prosperity. The god-king escorted them to door of his palace with great courtesy and deference, going unshod while they were shod.

I worked in haste, but with great care. This would be my greatest work; if fortune was with me, it would be visible for a short time before the soldiers had it scrubbed away. All who saw it must understand its message.

Then, my listeners, came my doom. Then came the words that I feared: "You are with the revolutionaries, are you not?"

My hand jerked, and a corn tassel turned into a fork of lightning. I told myself to be brave, and I hoped that I could provoke the soldiers into killing me before they could torture me. Above all, I resolved not to betray my comrades. But I regretted that I would never complete my great painting.

The quiet voice came again, "Don't be afraid. I won't call the soldiers. Your work is beautiful; it makes me weep for our people."

I realized the voice came from above and behind me. I turned around slowly and looked up. A young man peered down at me from atop the pile of grain sacks.

"Who are you? What are you doing up there?" I whispered.

He rolled off the wagon and dropped silently to my side. "I am Toxillan. I know the foreman of this warehouse; he hired me to watch over the maize tonight until it can be unloaded. I fell asleep up there." He examined my painting closely. "Are you? Are you really with the revolutionaries?"

To trust or not to trust? Only the god can know what is in the heart of a man — is that not true, my hearers? In the Tenochtitlan of old this youth would be in the warriors' training house by now; he might even have taken captives in battle. Now he guarded grain sacks for a few pennies, and if he wished to earn more, he could denounce me to the guard for silver. Or he could be trying to earn my confidence, seeking the names of my comrades before he betrayed us all.

"Why would you think that? I am only an artist, seeking a large space for my art." My hands moved swiftly to repair the damage to the painting and to complete it, while my mind spun and darted like a rabbit, trying to escape this trap.

"The message of your painting, of a ruler's responsibilities of compassion and generosity, is clear for all to see. Those who see this will hate the cruel Hernan the more, and be more willing to strike against him. And whether you trust me or not," he said, fixing me with a

"OBEY THE ...
EDICTS OF THE
GREAT CAPTAIN
CORTES. YOU ARE
SUBJECTS OF THE
KING OF SPAIN
NOW. IF YOU DEFY
HIM, THE PENALTY
IS DEATH!"

shrewd glance and seeming to read my thoughts in my face, "I now must join your cause. When this is discovered in the morning, my head will be forfeit for my failure to keep a good watch, and I will be presumed to have aided you."

He was right, and I cursed that I had not been more careful. Now I had embroiled an innocent in my own danger. I looked at my masterpiece. There was still time to scrub it from the Wall before daybreak.

Toxillan saw me reach for my scraper and caught my hand. "Do not destroy it! The soldiers will do that soon enough. Let our people see it and have their eyes opened."

"But the danger to you and to your family!"

"My father died defending the city; I have only a mother and a little brother, a fosterling. Even the hispanios are not depraved enough to act against a woman and her child. But I must warn them, and find a kinsman to

shelter them. As for me, it is time, and past time, that I became a warrior. Finish now, quickly! I can see the daystar in the sky!"

I could have spent many days and nights perfecting my artwork, but I well knew the need for haste. I did not even stop to clean my brushes, but threw all into my sack, pinched out the little lantern, and slipped away with Toxillan. We hid from the dawn patrols until the streets filled with people going about their business, then made our way across the city to the Court of the Woodcarvers, where Toxillan lived with his mother and brother. He told me that his father had been a fashioner of carved doors, and that he himself had been studying the art under a cousin. His family lived upon the little he could earn and the charity of his cousin and the local calpulli — which is to say they all starved together.

Early morning sunlight slanted across piles of fragrant wood shavings that littered the courtyard, and the air rang with the sounds of mallet and adze. There was great destruction in the city from the Castilians' cannons and catapults during the eighty days of the siege; the woodcarvers had plenty of splintered doors and shattered roof beams to work into new forms for whoever could afford to pay or barter.

Toxillan and I were only steps from his door when a commotion began behind us. A guard of white-skin soldiers, led by a captain on a horse, entered the courtyard. Toxillan and I shrank against the wall, but the soldiers were not after us. They rushed into a house across the courtyard and dragged out a man by his hair. The soldiers began to beat him, while the captain questioned him.

Men dropped their tools, women scooped up their babies, and a crowd formed in front of the house. The captain turned to face us; his horse pranced and stamped, and the people shrank away from the touch of the god. The captain proclaimed, "This man is suspected of aiding the impious ones who reject the Christian god and seek to bring war and destruction upon the city again. Mexicana, do not be led astray! Obey the teachings of the priests and the edicts of the Great Captain Cortes. You are subjects of the King of Spain now. If you defy him, the penalty is death!"

The people around us muttered and seethed, but they knew they were powerless against the hispanio guns. The man's wife and children stood by, piteously protesting his innocence, but the soldiers shoved them aside. As the man was being bound to be taken to the palace, a small figure darted through the crowd and attacked the nearest guard. I was startled to recognize Juanito, the child from the market. The soldier kicked the boy away, and I saw how Juanito had earned many of his bruises.

Toxillan's eyes kindled with anger, and he thrust his way forward,

but I grabbed his arm. "Think of the danger!" I hissed at him. "Think of your family!"

"He is my family! That is my brother!"

Juanito rolled to his feet at the edge of the crowd and prepared to launch himself at the guard again, but Toxillan reached through the press of bodies and caught him. The boy screamed curses at the hispanio, who lifted his arquebus to fire, but the captain motioned him to stop and rode his horse closer. Around men's hands tightened upon their axes and carving knives; Toxillan clapped his hand over Juanito's mouth and strained to hold him close.

The captain halted so close to me that I could feel the hot breath of the horse-god on my cheek. "That boy needs a good flogging, to teach him to address the representative of the King with respect!"

Toxillan kept his eyes cast down, his grip on Juanito as iron. He knelt and forced Juanito down on one knee also. "Forgive the child, great lord. He is fevered; he does not know what he is saying."

The captain frowned and reined his mount backward. "If he has the pox, you should take him to the priests. They will shrive him before he dies." He turned back to his captive; already we were forgotten.

Our faces were stone, but inside we were weeping as we watched the soldiers drag away the woodcarver. I knew that he would be taken to the palace, where he would be tortured and murdered, just as Motecuhzoma had been. Motecuhzoma, who had invited the white-skins into the city as guests, and had offered them the hospitality of his own hearth. These invaders are altogether without honor!

When the soldiers were out of sight Toxillan released Juanito and tried to soothe his fury. "Never, never will I abase myself before the barbarians again!" the child cried. "You should not have forced me! They are not worthy of honor!"

Toxillan replied, "My brother, be ruled by me in this. Listen to me as you would to our father who is dead, who died at their hands. I think only of your safety, and the sorrow of our mother if she should have to mourn you. You cannot fight the Castilians. None of us can fight them now. Perhaps someday."

"Someday? My city is dying, my brother! Tenochtitlan my mother is being ground under the Castilians' heels like maize in a metate! Soon she will blow away in the wind and there will be nothing left here to tell of our glory except tumbled stones!"

So Juanito spoke, and he ran from the courtyard weeping in his rage and shame. Toxillan sighed as one who had witnessed this before. "Let him go. He will return when he is calmer. I must say farewell to my mother now."

Toxillan made his farewells, telling his mother and his cousin as little as he could about the necessity of his leaving. We returned to my house for the day to rest; I planned to take Toxillan at nightfall to the house of one of my comrades for hiding.

That evening, before we could set out, a message came for Toxillan through methods I had arranged. Juanito had not returned to his mother's house. Toxillan heard this message with great distress. "We must find him, Mixal! I cannot go to safety while he might be in danger!"

Our searches, however, were fruitless. Juanito had not taken refuge with neighbors, at the local calpulli, or in any of the places Toxillan thought he might go to hide and nurse his grief. We could not stay in the streets much longer. If we encountered a white-skin patrol, we could expect a beating, or worse.

I looked up at the moonless vault of the sky and had an idea. "Follow me, Toxillan. I think — I fear — I know where your brother is."

The Great Pyramid loomed black against the stars; the sacred fire no longer burned night and day upon its crest, since the Castilians had destroyed the temple and murdered the priests. Toxillan and I circled it warily; I was beginning to think that I had guessed wrong when we found the boy at the southeastern corner of the pyramid, directly across from the Black Palace.

Torches blazed in the palace, and I could hear the sounds of feasting where Cortes nightly entertained his captains with the dancing of young maidens and with delicate foods and pulque from Motecuhzoma's storehouses. Kneeling in the dirt facing the palace, Juanito chanted over five small mounds before him; his arms dripped blood from many piercings, and his eyes streamed tears. He did not resist when Toxillan lifted him up, and he fell deeply asleep in his brother's arms long before we got him home.

THE CASTILIANS PROFESSED HORROR AND DISGUST WHEN THEY FIRST witnessed our custom of offering blood for the gods' nourishment, but their priests are full of praise for their own god-king, that he offered his blood and flesh to bless his children. The priests hold up cups at their mass; "This is his blood!" they cry. But they lie: it is only wine. Do they think their god is a drunkard? Do they think that he will not know the difference? Do they not understand that the sacrifice must be ever-going? Unless blood is offered, how can the mysteries be pierced? How can magic be created? How can change be ransomed from history?

My listeners, you know what the times were like then in the city: Each day some incident occurred between the Mexica and the hispanios, but the people remembered the humiliation of their defeat, and so open fighting never broke out. Almost daily those who were suspected of insurrection were executed in the main square. If they confessed and accepted the white-skinned god, they were hanged. If they protested their innocence and failed to repent, they were tied to stakes and burnt alive.

My comrades told me that a blood-price of ten silver pieces had been placed on the head of the unknown artist whose work had been found on the Great Wall by the bakery storehouse. The painting had been seen by the entire slave gang which unloaded the grain wagon, and by the slave overseer and the baker's crew. Some had seemed to be moved by the story told in paint, but the hispanios ordered the whole lot flogged after they scrubbed the paint from the wall. The baker, for having failed to prevent the crime, was sentenced to provide bread and tortillas to the hispanios for a month without recompense.

My comrades, Toxillan, and I began to make plans for our next move against the conquerors, but the hands of the gods were upon us, and our destinies were already written. A messenger came in haste to tell Toxillan that his brother Juanito was in danger. We ran through the streets; we came almost too late to the place of trouble.

Juanito stood before the Great Pyramid, which by Cortes's edict must not be approached by any Mexica. With his small body he guarded the plants which had sprouted from his beans. I should say "plant," for the five seedlings had intertwined into one sturdy stalk, which was already the thickness of a warrior's thigh. The strange plant had climbed the steep stairs of the pyramid; already it reached halfway to the top, and it grew higher even as we watched.

A crowd had formed, soldiers drew near, and in the midst of the spectacle, Juanito paraded before his beans and proclaimed freedom had come to the people of Tenochtitlan. Toxillan tried to persuade the boy to come away, but he refused. A soldier approached and grabbed the child. Quick as a rat, Juanito turned his head and sank his teeth into the soldier's hand. The hispanio sprang back with a curse and drew his sword. "No!" Toxillan cried, and leaped to his brother's defense. In moments the fatal act was accomplished: The soldier lay dying, blood streamed from the sword in Toxillan's hand, and the crowd fell silent in horror.

"Seize them!" the captain of the guard shouted; "Run!" a Mexica cried — but where was there to go? "Follow me!" Juanito called, and leaped up the sacred stairs. What choice had we? We followed.

So did the soldiers, though more slowly in their armor and carrying their heavy arquebuses. We reached the top and thought to escape down the other side, but we saw that the soldiers had surrounded

the pyramid. There was only one avenue of escape, and, as before, Juanito led us to it.

The magical bean plant had reached the top of the pyramid before any of us. It twined around the ruins of the Great Temple, the twinned temples to Huitzilopochtli and Tlaloc, and then it grew straight up into the sky. Juanito scrambled up the stalk and disappeared into the foliage; Toxillan boosted me to the lowest leaf-branch, then swung up himself. By the time the first soldiers arrived at the pyramid's summit, we were hidden a bowshot up among the whispering leaves.

The soldiers were not deceived; they could easily see we were not climbing down the pyramid on any side, and their search of the ruins took only moments to prove we were not there. The captain regarded the strange bean plant. "Cut it down," he ordered. Two of his men made their sign to ward off demons and attacked the stalk with their swords, but the bright steel bounced off the fibrous trunk, and the plant scarcely shuddered from the impact.

"You, climb up and fetch them down. Throw them down if you have to!" the captain ordered next. Below us we saw a mailed foot appear through the leaves and brace itself upon a branch. Then the branch gave a little shiver, and the foot slipped off. A thud and a curse signaled the soldier's unceremonious landing in the dirt. He tried again, and his fellows, but the magical plant would not let the hispanios climb as we had done so easily.

"They will use your guns next," Toxillan said. "We must climb higher." And so we did. The soldiers shredded leaves and tendrils firing blindly upward, and once a ball whistled close enough for us to hear, but for the most part, we were already out of range, and the leaves grew so thickly that none could see us.

We stopped climbing when the danger seemed less and took counsel among ourselves. We could hear the soldiers below as they assigned guards to the plant; to climb down was folly. "Perhaps they will leave when night falls," I ventured.

Toxillan shook his head. "I killed one of them. They will not forget or forgive. My life is forfeit, and they will wait at the base of this plant until the stars drop from the sky, if necessary, in order to apprehend me."

Juanito said, "We cannot go down, my brother, and we cannot stay here. There is only one thing we can do, and we must trust the gods and this magical plant that it is the right thing."

I wanted to argue, but Juanito was right. To go down was certain death; to go up was uncertainty itself. We climbed.

From time to time there were gaps in the mat of leaves that surrounded us, and we could see the heights to which we had attained. We passed the top of the Great Walk; the stories said that Tlaloc himself had raised it, to protect his children. Near its top we could see how the bones of the sacrifices, covered with lime, were becoming one with the stones below. As we climbed higher we saw the great cities of Tenochtitlan and Tlatelolco drawn like maps upon the earth. We could see the afternoon sun shining upon the canals, the colorful gardens of the chinampas that floated upon the lake. At first I was terrified to look, but the beauty of the scene and the stability of the stalks and branches we climbed, soon reduced me to the simple effort of hauling myself ever higher. When exhaustion won over fear, we tied ourselves to the bean trunk with our cloaks and slept.

For three times three days, Juanito, Toxillan, and I climbed the magical plant. When we thirsted, we drank the dew that pooled on the leaves and in the joints of the branches. When we hungered, we cut open the young bean pods and ate the sweet paste and developing seeds within. Only Juanito could now stand to look out between the leaves at the earth far below. The dun and green fields, the brown and purple mountains, the white snows on Popocatepetl and Iztaccihuatl were beautiful, but as far away as another

A MAN AS TALL AS
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SKY AND FRIGHTEN-
ING BONE TOOLS
HUNG FROM HIS BELT.

world. I felt as one who had died, on a journey without end.

On the tenth day we came to a place even stranger: The bean plant had broken through the roof of the sky, heaving it aside as the seedling heaves aside the clods of earth in its search for air. Cautiously we explored the sharp edges of the hole, then climbed through.

At first my eyes refused to recognize what they saw: vast walls of stone, huge structures of wood. Then Toxillan said with wonder in his voice, "It is a house."

And so it was. The walls of huge, mortared stone blocks were straight and square. A circular hearth large enough to bake tortillas for an army stood in the center of the room. The enormous structures of wood were stools and tables. Near where we stood, a pair of sandals longer than Toxillan was tall sat carelessly tossed aside.

Our amazement turned to terror as thunderous quakings announced the return of the enormous house's gigantic inhabitant. A man as tall as the tallest pyramid entered the room. His skin was the azure of a clear winter sky; he wore decorated goggles about his eyes, and frightening bone tools hung from his belt. We stood frozen in horror, then ran to hide ourselves from that hideous sight.

The giant took off his goggles and washed his face and hands in a basin. Then he began to sniff the air and look about. He drew near to the bean plant and knelt to examine the floor around its hole.

The giant rose and smiled; he opened his mouth, and made noises so loud we all fell to our bellies and covered our ears with our hands, sure that we were about to die. The giant waited, then frowned, as though what he expected had not happened. Then he made the noises again, but more softly. I realized that he was speaking, but the words boomed so loudly I could not understand them.

A third time the giant spoke, more softly still, and these, O my listeners, are the words he uttered: "My children, do not fear. Long have I waited for you to visit me! Be welcome in my house. Come, join me in feasting and song!"

It was long ere the giant was able to win our trust and coax us from our hiding places. Patiently he sat upon his stool and talked to us of his life in the sky-land, and of his joy at seeing his children again. Later he told us that he could quite clearly see each of us in his hiding place, but he feared to terrify us further by plucking us into the open. Had he done so, my listeners, I would surely have died of terror and not be telling this to you now, for I would have been certain that I was about to be gobbled down between those enormous teeth, or have my bones ground to flour beneath his fist.

No, my lord was patient with his creatures, as befits a god. For god we could not doubt he was. We had entered into the sky domain of Tlaloc, he who sends the rains upon the thirsty lands and makes the young maize grow tall and strong. And our lord Tlaloc entreated us humbly to accept the honor of his hospitality.

One by one we crept out of hiding and came forward to abase ourselves before the god and beseech his mercy. He raised each of us up with his own mighty hand (one finger of it, at least), gave us thimbles of water to wash ourselves, and scraps of cloth to wind into the most generous of garments. He lifted us up to his table and set tiny crockery before us, and we feasted upon roasted maize kernels and shreds of soft tortillas, shavings of cheese and tiny beakers of milk.

We each told the god the story of how we had come to the sky-land. Tlaloc listened thoughtfully to our tales, and was much saddened to hear how Tenochtitlan, his glorious city, had fallen to for-

sign conquerors. When Juanito related his mysterious heritage, the god did a strange thing: He knelt before the child and knocked his head upon the floor. And he spoke to the youth thus: "My son, what is to be has already come to pass. The time is almost ripe for you to come into your glory. All the gods bless you through me."

After the dinner the giant brought out his treasures and shared them with us his guests. He brought out a magical quetzal bird, which laid eggs of solid gold, and gave each of us an egg. Then he brought out his magical pipes of bone. I expected Tlaloc to play for us, but the pipes played of themselves. Tlaloc said, "My brother Quetzalcoatl breathed upon these pipes and made them live, and now they play sweet and soothing tunes all evening." He brought out his magical purse, full of gold coins. Tlaloc set beside each of us a heap of coins taller than our heads, and lo! the purse was full again.

FOR MANY DAYS WE ENJOYED THE HOSPITALITY OF OUR BENEFACTOR Tlaloc. He showed us many wonders in that place: his fields of blue maize; his pastures of rich, blue grass; his sacred well, which inexhaustibly watered the fertile sky-land and provided rains to the earth below, and through which he could observe the doings of men. There were colorful fowl which he fed and which stayed with him, and laid eggs which he gathered daily. He owned another strange animal, the sheep, which he herded in flocks. This beast possessed a very soft, fluffy, pure white hair, called "wool," which Tlaloc cut from the animal, then spun and wove into a cloth as fine as cotton, but much warmer. These sheep also gave milk, which Tlaloc drank and fermented like our pulque and made into fine, white cheeses. If the Mexica had such animals, they would never need to hunger again.

Thus we learned many great things, and we grew tall and strong on such god-like foods. One night, as we sat feasting and listening to the playing of the magical pipes, there was a disturbance in the corner of the house where the bean plant grew. A handful of tiny men climbed through the hole in the floor. When they saw us sitting there, they were greatly afraid and ran about seeking to hide. Tlaloc spoke to them gently, as he had to us before: "Do not be afraid. We will not hurt you. Be welcome in this house. Come and eat with us."

The tiny men crept slowly from their hiding places, and I realized that it was not that they were small, but that I and my companions had grown as tall as Tlaloc while we had been in the sky-country. The men were covered with bruises and sores, and their ribs stuck out with hunger. We offered them beans and maize and soft tortillas and cheese. They were amazed and abased themselves before the god, who urged them to eat.

When the men had filled their bellies, they apologized for their poor manners and introduced themselves. One spokesman was appointed to answer Tlaloc's questions. He said they had come from Tenochtitlan, which was in even sadder condition than when Juanito, Toxillan, and I had left. The conquistadors had put even the children of the city to work in the mines, such was their greed for gold and silver. The children, the men, and the women often died of accident or disease, "But at least they are fed there by the slave-masters. In the streets of Tenochtitlan, the children are starving to death," the man said.

"The Castilians regard the magic bean plant with fear and anger. They could not cut it down with their swords or their axes of steel, their priests could not dispel the demon they thought inhabited it, so they set guards and cannon about it to keep the people away. But the people regard it as a sign that their deliverance is at hand, and they flock to it. Some of us overwhelmed the guards, and we few won through to the stalk."

Tlaloc questioned the men closely about the Castilians' abuses, and we all wept to hear of how our people suffered. The god invited the men to stay with us, but they said, "My Lord, thank you for your hospitality, and we will rest here with you for a few days, but then we wish to press on in our journey. The magical bean plant has grown so tall, it has entangled the Moon in her journey across the sky. Now she stands in her full glory day and night, and we wish to climb to her country and see such a wonder."

For three days and three nights the men feasted with us, and on

the morning of the fourth day they prepared to resume their climb. Tlaloc gave them many gifts, and food for the journey, and warm cloaks of wool. "Tell my sister the Moon to treat you well in honor of your courage. I have commanded it." The men abased themselves three times and departed. Afterward Tlaloc said to us, "I must think about what these visitors have told me. Tend my beasts for a time."

Tlaloc went to his sacred well and observed Tenochtitlan through its lens. Then for three days and three nights he sat apart with his cloak over his head, fasting and praying. He pierced his flesh many times with his bone awl, and sang songs of lamentation. On the fourth day he came to us and said, "My friends, I have neglected those who cry out to me. A father must act to save his children. Juanito, to you I give all my regalia of power. When the time comes, you will know what to do."

We all adopted the posture of respectful farewell, and Juanito knocked his forehead against the ground three times. "I will not fail you, my father."

Tlaloc stood upon the lip of his sacred well and said, "My children, I have heard your prayers. I am coming to help you in your time of need." Then he jumped into the well.

O my listeners, great was the fall of the god Tlaloc to the earth below! For three days and three nights he fell, and in the lens of the sacred well we could see the people of Tenochtitlan scurrying about with fear as the god's gigantic visage rushed toward them. On the fourth day his body struck the earth and his bones were all broken, and He-Who-Lies-on-the-Earth lay upon it in death.

Great then was our sorrow to lose our friend. We cast our cloaks over our heads and wept, we cut our arms and chanted the praises of the god. For three days and three nights we fasted and grieved. Then Juanito came to Toxillan and myself and lifted us up. He said, "My friends, come with me to see what has happened in our city."

We went to the sacred well and looked down upon the city. Great were the changes that the god's fall had wrought! His head had fallen upon the Black Palace, where Cortes and his chief captains lived, and crushed it utterly. His outflung arms had shattered many of the Castilians' fortifications throughout the city, and his legs had tumbled the stones of the Great Wall. His blood had run smoking through the streets, and where it had touched the Eagle Gate, the doors had sprung wide and the guards had fallen senseless from the fumes. The shock of that falling had shaken the ripe beans from the magical bean plant; they had fallen upon the city, and all over Tenochtitlan the people were eating their fill again.

Many had fled the city. I saw them in the salt marshes to the south, making bows and cane arrows, spears and war clubs, and braiding the soft grasses into ropes to capture the horse gods. Others had cut wide canals across the city's causeways, to keep the Castilians from escaping; and still others paddled their dugout canoes on the lake, raining fire arrows upon the hispanio ships, which drifted, burning. The conquistadors and their allies had retreated to the city's eastern quarter, where they were pinned with their backs to the lake. Our people had captured some of their cannon, and had turned the machines upon their former masters. And the shock of the god's fall had also aroused Tepeyollotl, He-Who-Lives-under-the-Earth. His sacred place Popocatepetl rumbled and hissed, and from time to time belched forth fiery boulders, which fell upon the Castilians and dismayed them.

The men and women of the city had struck off their chains, and they attacked the hispanios fiercely, even though most were armed only with sticks and stones. Some had retrieved the regalia they had hidden when Motecuhzoma was murdered, and now Jaguar and Eagle Knights marshalled the people again. My listeners, I wept for the bravery and ferocity of the warriors of Tenochtitlan and Tlatelolco!

The priests sacrificed captured Castilians in full view of their fellows, and cried out, "Great Gods, thank you for this opportunity! We beseech you to send us a leader to guide us to victory over our enemies!"

Beside me, Juanito said, "My people summon me, and I must go." I turned to see that he had arrayed himself in the panoply of Tlaloc:

Continued on page 83

A thrilling adventure of dazzling magic
and searing prophecy is coming.

WITCH FIRE

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THE
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DEL
REY

*Just as there's a thin line
between love and hate, an even thinner
one exists between life and death.*

The girls in their pastel dresses move among the gray uniforms hopeful as a rainbow against a bank of storm clouds. Cherokee rose pink. Pale honeysuckle yellow. Wisteria purple. The girls pin red rosebuds on the boys' breasts as if to mark the place that someday will bloom rutilant, wet with blood. The regiment is presented with a flag on which every woman in the town has made at least one stitch so that any soldier in the regiment can say that the flag was made by his own sweetheart. Soon, the drums will beat out the Call for Assembly and they'll all reconvene at the train station. But for now, a string and brass band is playing patriotic songs like "Dixie" and "The Bonnie Blue Flag." During a break in the music, she sweeps through the doorway, a streak of brilliant white light slicing the room.

She has black hair, shiny as obsidian, green eyes like cold emeralds. And her dress — dazzling magnolia white as pure as snow in Heaven. All the soldier boys crowd about her. Each one wants a little kiss to take with him to the battlefield. A cool kiss of this Miss'ippi snow. She blushes, as decorum says she must, and gives away only one — to the lieutenant whom she dares to love.

DEBORAH THÉRESE D'ONOFRIO
Illustration by Janet Aulisio



AFTER THREE YEARS AND MANY BATTLES, THE FLAG IS now tattered; Many of the girls' stitches as well as their sweethearts have been blown to pieces. Her clothes have turned black. Her beautiful plantation home has become a hospital. She has lost a father, two brothers, and her lieutenant to The Cause.

In the summer of '62 she fell in love a second time. He was a soldier boy from Jackson who came to find healing in her parlor-made-hospital. He seemed safe to love; he only had a slight wound where a minié ball grazed his thigh during the battle at Pittsburg Landing, right as he stood on the steps of the Shiloh Church meetinghouse. But after only three days he developed a fever, his veins from his leg to his heart changed from blue to red, and she lost him too.

Now a year later, she manages to move among the carpet of dirty and bloody men that now stretch from her front gallerie through the house and out the back door. On both floors. The sound of drums now means that there will be more comin' soon. She hates the drum-thumping, that noise which goes beyond hearing, becoming a pounding deep against her soul. It near about drives her crazy.

On this Sunday afternoon she escapes the sobbing and dying men. There is a cabin nearby. A Cadian witch-woman who grows flowers and herbs lives there. She cooks up medicines for the heart and mind.

Here, the trees wore heavy gray shrouds of Spanish moss long before any man's war. As she walks down the garden path, the chili peppers hiss, the okra sniggers. From the shade of the cedar trees, the hearts' ease speaks:

"What for you come here, Cherie? Death done come and took all you men. Death don' care, man yours or no. Don' care man gray or blue, him. Is Death, she been try make 'em all hers. Is why they fightin', for true."

Now she is running, but the witch has set her free. With each step comes blessed relief. The grief lies up inside her. Her dress turns from black to Confederate gray to magnolia white. Once again she can walk through the rooms of dying men, applying a hand on a burning forehead here, dropping a word of comfort there, but her heart is unscathed.

Men ask for her. Especially the dying ones. The summer sun burns down and the humid air is thick enough for fishes to breathe, but her hand is always cool; her words somehow bracing:

"It is all right, soldier boy," she whispers. "When it is time, you go on home, y'hear?"

Then they die real peaceable. And she is not hurt.

MAJOR MCKAY WESLEY O'CONNOR ENTERS HER parlor like all the men have done of late — that is, head first and on his back. Since Mr. Grant's fine Northern Army of the Tennessee has been courting Vicksburg, her Miss'ippi makeshift hospital has seen more than its share of Yankee guests. Over half the men staying at her plantation wear the blue uniform. The wounds of war somehow bleed all the differences out of them. Major O'Connor comes, not as a wounded man, but as one ill with fever caught from the long nights slogging about in the swamps during his army's futile attempt to cross the Father of Waters. The vermin, 'gators, and snakes habitating the bayous and tributaries have made the Yankee soldiers proclaim: If this is the land the Rebs want to take out of the Union, then God bless 'em and they're welcome to it.

Still, the Yankees have not gone home.

Three days after the fall of Vicksburg, Major O'Connor's fever breaks and he is able to take account of his surroundings. He watches one woman in particular. The one with black hair, green eyes, dressed in white. No matter what parts of man spatter her dress during the day, red of blood or black of mud, by evening it is again white as snow, but he is only mindful of the fact that she is beautiful and somehow special.

"Tell me why you are so different from all the others?" he finally asks, reaching out to catch her hand as she passes by his pallet.

"Why major, I can only assume you are referrin' to the fact that I

*She is coolness in the
furnace of summer,
a refreshing breath of
air to a man who has seen
too much, has heard
the drums beat...*

do not wear a uniform."

Surely she cannot mean that he has mistaken her for a soldier. "You mean the Southern women wear uniforms too?"

"They do indeed, Major O'Connor. Our men wear gray and their women wear black."

Major McKay Wesley O'Connor looks around him and sees that this is a fact. Everywhere there are women in the black satin dresses, garnished with mourning veils. "It's much the same in Ohio, miss," he says.

She barely hesitates in her ministrations. "I reckon that is so," But does that change the grim set of her rosy lips or brush color on her white cheeks? It does not. Instead she assumes the air of righteous indignation she is confident would be fitting the Yankee woman, her Sister in Grief. To the untrained eye, the look is much the same as the icy one she wore before.

The Major's eye is quite trained when it comes to regarding the ladies. When she moves off to tend to another poor soldier boy, he smiles faintly. "That's one cool woman."

A South Carolinian private lies beside him, and he now props himself up on one elbow to look after that brief squall of Miss'ippi snow. "She has the four o'clock in the morning courage," the private agrees, "but don' she look like an angel though?"

AS HE GAINS HIS STRENGTH OVER THE NEXT FEW WEEKS, Maj. McKay O'Connor's eyes are always upon her. Other women protest her wearing too lively a color in this hour of Southern Distress, and they insist on tying a black band around her upper arm. With no attention by her own self, the armband blanches snow white by the next morning. Soon those women start leaving her alone. But not the men, no sir. Not McKay O'Connor.

That Yankee major comments on her dress. He asks for her to help him feed himself while he is still too weak to do it (and for quite a time thereafter). He smiles at her when she catches his eye. He courts her with words. He tries to melt that Miss'ippi snow.

God knows how long the nights are, alone in the bed. She has the memory of a man's lips on her mouth, the feel of his hand upon her breast, and it is far worse than the not knowing such things at all. This Yankee boy's attention is getting past the protection she gained

Continued on page 81



"THE ULTIMATE ANIMAL ADVENTURE."

—Terry Pratchett, author of the Discworld novels

GABRIEL KING'S

THE *W*ILD ROAD

Is there a secret world of cats?

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PATHWAYS THROUGH

BY TERRI WINDLING

"I HAVE A VERY CLEAR MEMORY OF MY FIRST ENCOUNTER WITH MYTH,"

recalls British artist Alan Lee, "sitting in a mobile library and traveling, at the same time, with Theseus on the road to Athens. By the time we'd met, and disposed of, the pine-bending giant Sinis, I'd become completely entranced. Within a few months I'd read every book on myths, legends, and folklore in our two nearest libraries."

The young boy entranced by ancient tales never lost his taste for magic and myth, and grew up to become one of the finest book illustrators of our time. His distinctively elegant watercolor paintings—adorning Greek myths, Arthurian legends, Tolkien's Middle Earth, and other mystical tales—have earned him a world-wide following, the prestigious Kate Greenaway Award, and the deep respect of fellow artists and writers.

Like Arthur Rackham or Edmund Dulac from Britain's Golden Age of illustration, Alan's work imbues imaginary landscapes with such startling reality one can almost step inside the paintings to travel beyond the visible horizon. Walking into Alan's studio, filled to the brim with paintings and books, is to cross a portal into the Otherworld of a master artist's vision, a place where stories come to life in pencil strokes and washes of color.

Alan was born in Middlesex, England in 1947, and decided at a young age that art would be his life's vocation. After studies at Ealing School of Art he became a freelance illustrator, working in the fields of book publishing, advertising, and film. During these early years, his London work space was shared with a number of other artists—including Brian Froud, a painter also drawn to myths and legends. These two friends teamed up to create *Faeries*, a book exploring the rich tradition of faery lore in the British Isles, reaching past our modern image of the creatures (sweet little sprites with butterfly wings) to capture the faeries of the old oral tales: earthy, wild, mysterious,



THE ART

ENCHANTED LANDS:



OF ALAN LEE

For scenes like this medieval street market, artist Alan Lee begins with historic research and then adds his own brand of whimsy and magic.

Alan roots his magical visions in the real landscapes of England and Wales. The woods and streams near his home in Ticean can often be found in his paintings. RIGHT: Nature is a potent source of magic to ancient magicians and modern artists alike. This horned creature of the wild comes from the pages of *The Mabinogion*.



and capricious as a force of nature. Published in 1978, this ground-breaking book became a best seller, as well as a highly influential text for a whole generation of artists, writers, and film-makers to come.

Just prior to the creation of *Faeries*, Alan, his family, and Brian had moved from London to a small village in Devon. The mossy woods with their twisted trees, the ivy-clad lanes and the rolling moor all had their effect on the art for *Faeries*, as well as on Alan's subsequent work—revealing his core as a landscape artist, directly inspired by the lines, tones, and forms of the natural world. Dartmoor proved to be the perfect setting for an artist of Alan's temperament—a land of great and varied beauty, richly steeped in ancient tales; a land of Bronze Age ruins and standing stones on the wind-swept hills.

The success of *Faeries* allowed him the time to pursue a project dear to his heart: paintings inspired by the *Mabinogion*, the great myth cycle of Wales. These magnificent tales are firmly rooted in the soil of the Welsh countryside, and so he followed the threads of the stories to Dyfed and Snowdonia, grounding himself in the colors, forms, and spirit of that Celtic land. Returning to his Devon studio with reference photos and sketchbook notes, he created exquisite paintings to accompany the Jones & Jones translation of the text. The result, published in a small edition by Dragon's Dream in 1982, remains one of Alan's finest accomplishments to date.

Over the next several years he continued to choose book projects with mythic resonance, such as *Castles* (an art book of imagery drawn from myth, romance, and magical literature, with text by David Day), *Merlin's Dream* (a beautifully rendered book of Arthurian tales retold by Peter Dickinson), and two children's picture books: *The Mirrorstone* (using holograms as doorways into the magical realms, with text by Michael Palin) and *The Moon's Revenge* (a gentle, wistful fairy tale by Joan Aiken). During these years he also exhibited art across England, Europe, and the United States, and worked on the designs for magical films such as *Legend* and *Eric the Viking*.

In 1988, Alan was approached by J.R.R. Tolkien's publisher to create 50 paintings for a lavish new edition of *The Lord of the Rings*, celebrating the first centenary of Tolkien's birth. This work took the artist two years to create and was published in 1991—a stunning achievement that beautifully captures the unique magic of Tolkien's world. (More recently, he completed illustrations for *The Hobbit*, published earlier this year.) Speaking about this massive undertaking, Alan says: "I first read *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit* when I was 18. It felt as though the author had taken every element I'd ever want in a story and woven them into one huge, seamless narrative; but more important, for me, Tolkien had created a place, a vast, beautiful, awesome landscape, which remained a resource long after the protagonists had finished their battles and gone their separate ways.

In 1992, Alan began a journey into a very different landscape when he agreed to illustrate new editions of the *Illiad* and *The Odyssey*, retold for young readers by Rosemary Sutcliffe. He'd retained his childhood love of these tales—and yet, he says, "I was apprehensive about the prospect of spending so much time on the battle plains of Troy, when my natural home, and main source of inspiration, had long been the woodlands and sodden hillsides of Dartmoor. I'd



rarely attempted to paint a landscape that wasn't at least as wet as the watercolors I worked in. I travelled to Greece, for the first time, with a copy of Pausanias as a guide and weighed down by paints, sketchpads and camera. I know that most of the action takes place in Turkey but I'd heard that there wasn't a lot to see at the site of Troy and though Mycenae would be a good substitute. I visited all the sites and museums I could, drawing artifacts and large crowds of Greek school children. I fell in love with all the Korai at the Acropolis and, best of all, went to Delphi, which had nothing to do with the story I was illustrating but is set in one of the most remarkable and beautiful landscapes I've ever seen."

Alan describes this research process as a way of "priming the pump," filling oneself with ideas and images before one actually sits down to work; thus, though his art is intuitive, flowing from the imagination, it is grounded in the real: in landscape, history, and artwork of the past. Armed with reference photos, sketchbook notes, and the rich visual impressions of his travels through Greece, Alan began to create a vision of a magical Greece that never was, halfway between myth and history, halfway between Homer's world and the gods. He recruited family and neighbors to model for the extended *dramatis personae* of the tales; I recall coming into his courtyard at the time to find a dying Hector laid out on the picnic table,

Andromache swooning above him. Sadly, Rosemary Sutcliffe died before this beautiful art was completed; she would surely have been thrilled to see her words (and Homer's) brought so splendidly to life in *The Black Ships of Troy* (winner of the Kate Greenaway Gold Medal) and *The Wanderings of Odysseus*.

"I like to work in watercolor," Alan tells me, "with as little under-drawing as I can get away with. I like the unpredictability of a medium which is affected as much by humidity, gravity, the way that heavier particles in the wash settle into the undulations of the paper surface, as by whatever I wish to do with it. In other mediums you have more control, you are responsible for every mark on the page—but with watercolor you are in a dialogue with the paint, it responds to you and you respond to it in turn. Print-making is also like this, it has an unpredictable element. This encourages an intuitive response, a spontaneity which allows magic to happen on the page. When I begin an illustration, I usually work up from small sketches—which indicate in a simple way something of the atmosphere or dynamics of an illustration; then I do drawings on a larger scale supported by studies from models—usually friends—if figures play a large part in the picture. When I've reached a stage where the drawing looks good enough I'll transfer it to watercolor paper, but I like to leave as much unresolved as possible before starting to put on washes. This allows for an interaction with the medium itself, a dialogue between me and the paint. Otherwise it is too much like painting by number, or a one-sided conversation.

I ask Alan whether he sees painting as an act of communication with something beyond our human ken—God, Mystery, call it what you will. "Perhaps in a more mythological sense than the religious orientation of the Renaissance. To draw a tree, to pay such close attention to every aspect of a tree, is an act of reverence not only toward the tree, and toward the earth itself, but also our human connection to it. This is one of the magical things about drawing—it gives us almost visionary moments of connectedness. Every element—hair, wind, rocks, water—is portrayed with one material—graphite, ink, paint—which binds it all together, bringing out the harmony we know exists in nature (created as it is, as we all are, by particles that have existed since the dawn of the universe.) This is the power of myth as well, binding us to the natural world. There have always been mythic tales of figures whose function is to act as an intermediary between humanity and nature—the shaman, the shape-shifter, the trickster—an embodiment of creative powers who appears in myths, fairy tales, and medieval legends all around the world. Often they have a touch of 'divine madness'—like Merlin, during his years in the wild through which he gained his divinatory powers. It is interesting to me that in

The richness of color and breadth of detail alan conjures in watercolor are truly awe-inspiring to other painters. BELOW: A page from the artist's sketchbook reveals the creative process as he turns ideas into paintings. RIGHT: In the Tower of Annwre, a beautiful sorceress attempts to ensnare King Arthur at the heart of an enchanted forest.



our century it is often artists who fulfill this function. And who, in popular stereotypes, are given the licence to be a bit mad. . . . look at Picasso, a trickster figure if there ever was one.

"The power of both myth and art is this magical ability to open doors, to make connections—not only between us and the natural world but between us and the rest of humanity. Myths show us what we have in common with every other human being, no matter what culture we come from, no matter what century we live in... and at the same time, mythic stories and art celebrate our essential differences."

When Alan first encountered Greek myths as a child, the stories "provoked a degree of excitement that can't be explained by their value as adventures, however great that may be. Though they were new to me I felt a sense of recognition, and my response, in particu-



lar to the more Otherworldly elements, suggests that they were meeting a spiritual need that was barely touched by the dull lectures and repetitions of the school and church acts of worship I regularly dozed through. I'm not suggesting that I wanted to sacrifice a bull to Zeus or consult a Sybil—I didn't know any Sybils—but that I found, unconsciously, a wider and deeper context for my hopes and fears, gained a sense of continuity and communion with the people of the different times and cultures that I read about, and an enhanced and more imaginative relationship with the natural world."

The intersection of myth and art does indeed produce a quality of

magic—as evident in the timeless beauty of Alan's illustrations of classic tales. The wandering paths through Middle Earth, the green valleys of ancient Wales, the vistas over the plains of Troy, and twisted trees of the Devon woods create a spell as potent and lasting as any conjured by Merlin himself. Yet the quiet magician behind the paintings seems unaware of the power of the magic he creates with pencil, pen, and brush. "I keep drawing the trees, the rocks, the river," he says. "I'm still learning how to see them; I'm still discovering how to render their forms. I will spend a lifetime doing that. Maybe someday I'll get it right." ♣



मिहना

पाल्या

त्या

महिषा

पुष्पविगुडका

They say that once a tiger has developed
a taste for humans, he never loses it.
Perhaps this is true ...

Tiger.Tiger.

A MAN-EATER, SO THE SAYING GOES, IS HELPLESS under the eyes of a maiden.
Rewati is not so sure. At the foot of her tree the tiger trap is complete, a V-shaped corridor of white gauze winding through saplings, raveled on short thorns. Behind her, the trap widens and vanishes into the jungle where she can hear beaters thrashing at the undergrowth, and the nervous cries of the elephants.

Rewati shifts bare feet on the rough branch and knots her fingers in the rope net. If she were standing on the ground the gauze would come up past the top of her head - too high for a tiger to jump, and despite the wispy thinness of the cloth, too dense for a tiger brain to conceive of tearing. Of course, if she were standing on the ground, she would be no better off than the half-dozen people the tiger has already killed.

She peers down, impatient, and a bit scared.

And to her surprise, he is there.

Without a sound.

In the scatter of brown leaves, framed in gauze and tall grass, the tiger looks up at her with calm green eyes.

BY SEVERNA PARK

Illustration by Charles Demorat

RADHA FANS HERSELF IN THE STIFLING MORNING HEAT and watches the blotter report scroll by on her computer screen.

Two weeks, here in rural Palghat, with 11 new bodies and a killer who leaves no clues. Not a footprint, just bodies in some dusty alley or floating in the canal.

They are calling him the Tiger because of the mauling, and the missing arms and legs. Papers all over India are calling this a rampage. The lab in Trivandrum is still trying to decide if those marks on the bones are from teeth, or what, and up and down the Malabar coast, police departments are ready to throw their unsolved corpses into this file, regardless of whether they match the Tiger's MO.

Radha takes a sip of hot Darjeeling. Since she's arrived it's gotten worse, which means the Tiger knows she's here. He's not really a tiger. He's just a murderous, flesh-eating lunatic, and this isn't the first time, or place, she's tracked him. He pretends to be a tiger. Radha thinks he might like to be a tiger—he certainly kills like one. But if he were a tiger he'd be the last one in all of India, and someone from a zoo would be tracking him down. Not her.

Radha switches screens to collect her v-mail.

Chief Simbel is first. The quality of the vid makes the creases in his dark skin look like black crayon lines. He frowns at the papers on his desk, and talks without looking up.

"The mayor is holding a press conference concerning the murders tomorrow morning, Detective Singh. May we expect some word from you on the progress of your investigation?"

Radha's interest in serial killers is something her family prefers not to understand. Her obsession with grisly murders always makes the commissioner in Trivandrum shrug uncomfortably when he introduces her to the local reporters. She doesn't look the part of a cop who's seen the variety of things that can be done to maim human bodies. In newspaper photos she appears as a slight woman with a delicate face, dressing in saris instead of Western clothes. She looks harmless, with a long black braid down her back and eyes as dark as monsoon clouds.

Her record of successful arrests might have made her the commissioner's first choice to deal with the trouble in Palghat, but her girlhood experience clinched it.

When he jokingly asked if anyone in the department had ever killed a tiger, she was the only one who raised a hand.

"When I was 12," she'd said, and everyone stared, trying to picture her doing that.

WHEN SHE WAS A GIRL, RADHA'S FAMILY LIVED IN A remote, marshy valley at the foot of the Western Ghats mountains. Her father and mother picked tea in Munnar, a long way from home. They were gone for months at a time, so Radha, her little sister, and her two younger brothers stayed with her mother's great-uncle, Raghubir. There were tigers then. Tigers in the hot forests.

Their green eyes would watch from the banks of the river.

Their tawny bodies would slip into the ebony creeks.

When you traveled by pole-boat down the blackwater estuaries, you had to be watchful. In the dry season especially, when the tigers were hungriest and the rivers were low enough for them to spring across.

Great-uncle Raghubir said they would not attack if you had the courage to stare them in the eye.

RADHA SETS THE COMPUTER TO CAPTURE THE REST OF her mail, and goes to the window.

The monsoon is late. The entire Malabar coast is dry as ash, and here, in the southern tip of India, the streets should be flooded to the middle of the doorways.

On the far side of the police station's palm-studded courtyard, the Vadakkunnathan temple ripples in the arid heat of morning. Brassy sunlight has changed the white stucco walls to russet orange. A cast iron gate makes black shadow stripes across it, like a tiger's hide.

She turns and paces her office. The building is a British leftover from colonial times, with high ceilings and plenty of parquet floor to pace. For herself, she has hung her mask and antique painting in the center of one wall. The mask has fooled a tiger once before. The painting is the one that shows how they used to trap man-eaters two centuries ago.

In a corridor of gauze.

REWATI'S FINGERS ARE TANGLED IN THE NET, AND SUDDENLY HER toes. She has to drop it, drop it, right on the tiger, but she can't. She struggles in the tree. Her arm goes through the wide weave of the net, then her ankle. The gauze shivers in a gust of wind as she wrestles with the woven rope. In the distance, an elephant trumpets. The beaters shout.

Below, the tiger yawns and stretches. He digs his claws into the tree, shearing away strips of bark. He sits, licks his lips, and cocks his head at Rewati.

"Rewati," he says, "come down and take away this veil."

IN THE VERY OLD DAYS, RAGHUBIR WAS A SHIKARI WHO hunted tigers with the Raj. He still had his rifle—an ancient breach-loader with a mahogany stock, finely inlaid with elephant ivory. He was too lame to hunt anymore, but he taught Radha and her siblings how to shoot. He told his tiger stories until the boys were sick of them. But Radha loved them, and could repeat them, word for word.

He would always start like this:

"This first thing you have to understand," Raghubir would say, "is that the tiger has its karma, the same as everyone else. This is one of the reasons that it kills."

"It kills because it's hungry," Radha would reply.

"Not always." And here, her great-uncle would think and puff on his cheroot, as though this were a conversation the two of them had never had before. "Some say that the tiger is an agent of Heaven that kills only those who have escaped some other violent death."

"The monks say they're frustrated demons."

"This could also be true," her uncle would say, "but in fact, I believe the only explanation for the cruelty of the tiger is that it is a tool of heavenly justice."

"Are you saying that a tiger that kills a man, might at one time have been a man?" Radha would ask.

"Most certainly," said her great-uncle. "The story of Rewati confirms this, and many hunters as well. The tigers that were once men

When he jokingly asked if anyone in the department had ever killed a tiger...

...She was the only one who raised a hand.

are the ones that study their prey. They stalk their victims the same as when they were criminals in a human state. When you hunt this kind of tiger, you must never assume it is only an animal," and here he would shake ash from the cheroot, "or you may end up as a tiger yourself one day."



REWATI STOPS STRUGGLING AND STARES. SHE'S NEVER heard a tiger speak, although there are stories where they do speak. But those are for children.

"Come down," says the tiger again. "Help me."

Rewati gulps and then laughs. At least the children's stories have prepared her for this. Still, a talking tiger isn't something to take lightly.

"You're no tiger," she says. "You're an agent of the gods, sent to take my soul if I'm foolish enough to believe you."

"Child," says the tiger, "I am no such thing."

"Then you're a demon," says Rewati, "and if I free you, you'll eat me. You'll run rampant through this kingdom, and in my next life, I will certainly pay for that."

"I shan't eat you," says the tiger. "Free me, Rewati, and I'll give what you most desire."

She's heard these kinds of stories as well. The girl carefully pulls her ankle out of the net. "You must be a sorcerer," she says. "You'll pretend to give me three wishes. On the last one, you fool me into doing something stupid. And then you'll eat me."

The tiger listens to the crashing in the undergrowth. The elephants are getting closer. For a moment he's so still Rewati isn't sure he's spoken at all. She twists her arm from out of the stiff rope and finds the corners of the net. All she has to do is lean over and drop it.

The tiger looks up. "I haven't time to eat you, Rewati. Tell me your fondest wish, and let me prove myself."



IN RADHA'S PAINTING, A GIRL IN A BLUE SARI FLINGS HER net over the snarling beast below. Beaters on foot and men on elephants close in from the distance. They appear to be falling from the sky because of the painting's flattened perspective. The girl's calm face reveals her saintly nature.

The tiger has tempted her, but she will overcome him. At the end of the story, the creature, a sorcerer in disguise, is captured and confined for the rest of his life.

Radha sits down at her desk and scrolls through her mail. An update from the Trivandrum police station, with a straightfaced note from the other detectives, congratulating her on her promotion to "the big city." There's a copy of her assignment letter and a notice about a required gun safety course. And then, an address header that makes her heart speed up.

Tiger: Tiger

It's a 1K document, like old-style E-mail, with a scrap of text attached—no vid. In a second, her software translates it.

Tell me your fondest wish, Rewati.

Radha prints the whole message, including the return pathway, which is complex as a jungle trail and, she suspects, full of false branchings. If it keep two or three of Chief Simbel's local cops busy, sifting through electronic chaff.

And no matter how complex, a return path is still a path.

Radha saves the message, then sends one line.

Let me see you as you truly are.



MAN-EATERS HAVE A PATTERN. THEY ARE OLD TIGERS, INJURED tigers, sometimes bored killers with a taste for easy blood. They are not particularly interested in men. Children will do nicely.

Radha's little sister, Kulu, went out in a boat one spring afternoon and was found the next morning mauled from head to foot, both arms missing, her sari shredded to bloody strips.

After the funeral, Radha's brothers left with mother and father for the tea plantation in Munnar. Radha was to stay at home to care for great-uncle Raghubir, who continued to tell his tiger stories, as though nothing had happened.

The monsoon was late that year. The river dried up into a narrow, muddy channel. The marshes barked, swarming with flies and mosquitoes. And the tiger stayed. He killed another girl, and another. The neighbors went after him with guns, even hired a *shikari* to track him down. He eluded them all.

Radha sat by the window, listening to the agent of heaven bellow its thirst and hunger. Peacocks shrieked in human-terror at the sound and exploded in a rush of indigo and sapphire from the tops of brittle trees.

She brushed wood shavings from her sari and dipped her fingers into a dish of green paint. By tonight, her mask would be complete.

She'd carved it from a bole of teakwood and colored it emerald green. Its mouth was bright red with white brows and lashes. To protect herself, she would put it on backward: a face in front, and one behind. She would meet the tiger's eye, like Rewati, even with her back to it.

That night, when her great-uncle was asleep, Radha counted out shotgun shells and hung them in a pouch around her neck. She put his inlaid rifle over her shoulder and went out into the night.



THE GIRL IN THE TREE PEERS DOWN, HOLDING THE EDGE of the net like a silken veil.

"What can you offer me?" she says.

"Anything, of course," says the tiger. "Wealth. Fame.

A handsome, loving husband."

"If you offer me wealth," says Rewati, "I won't know if you've told me the truth until I've freed you and gone home. If you offer me fame, it's the same thing."

"But a husband," says the tiger, "that's a different story."

"Why is that?" asks Rewati.

The tiger slides its great paw along the side of its face. One black stripe opens like a seam in a garment, and to her amazement she can see the face of a handsome young man inside.



THE CAFE IN THE MARKET SQUARE IS NO COOLER THAN RADHA'S office, but the local paper is just in. There is one interesting item.

That's an understandably hysterical interview with a woman whose younger sister was killed by the "Tiger" last week. The sister's body was found, half-chewed, by the canal, and her name was Kulu.

A common enough name, Radha tells herself, but when she turns the page, her hands are sweating.

She folds the paper and goes to find Kulu's surviving sister.

YOUNG RADHA'S NARROW BOAT SLICES THROUGH LOW WATER, PASSING raised gardens and dry paddies. The stream narrows and deepens

outside her village, close with banana leaves and rasping hanks of bamboo. Above her, the Moon only makes the night more obscure.

Somewhere along the bank a sambar deer barks in alarm. Monkeys scatter overhead, crashing through black branches. The ozone tang of fear is the smell of the predator. Now, in the early night, it is distinct.



THE SISTER LIVES IN A THATCHED HUT WITH HER aging father and two younger brothers. What's left of the canal, in this premonsoon heat, runs just outside their yard. Flowers lay in the stagnating water as a memorial.

Stems of white jasmine. Delicate, plum-colored lotus.

Inside the yard a pack of brown dogs race along the fence, barking wildly and raising clouds of yellow dust as Radha tries to have a conversation with the sister.

"I've answered these questions already," the sister says.

The two boys sit on a wooden bench in the shade of the house, watching, waving away flies. The father is nowhere to be seen. In her imagination, Radha places him on a mountainside in Munnar, picking damp green tea leaves.

"But what time did you last see her?" Radha asks again.

"It was evening. I don't know what time." She makes a motion toward the canal. "We heard her screaming. It was too dark to see. The boys went to get the rifle and flashlights. By that time ..." She covers her face.

"Did you see anything? Or anyone?"

The sister shakes her head. "If I had," she whispers, "I'd be dead, too." She turns back to the house and disappears inside.

The dogs bark and the two boys watch along the dry canal road until Radha is out of sight.



SHE DOESN'T SEE HIM AT FIRST. WHAT SHE SEES IS THE COLOR of his reflection. Amber-green eyes, glinting in black water. He is there, crouching in the shadows of the thumb-nail Moon.

Radha stops the boat and plants the pole to anchor it.

The mask on the back of her head gazes at the night sky as she kneels in the boat and sets the rifle butt against her shoulder.

The tiger stares back from the riverbank with calculating, strangely human eyes, and Radha hesitates. Has he studied her? Has he singled her out, as a soul that Heaven missed?

No. She is hunting him.

She aims the rifle and with trembling hands and pulls the trigger.

The mahogany stock slams into her, tipping the boat and throwing her into knee-deep water, ankle-deep mud.

The shot echoes through dense trees. Monkeys scream. Birds of every kind blunder into the night. Radha staggers in the muck. Her ears are ringing, her face stings with gunpowder. She gropes for the pouch of shells. Still dry. So is the rifle, but the boat is half-sunk and she doesn't see the pole anywhere. She crouches and strains to listen. There is only thick silence, as though every living thing has run away in terror.

And the tiger?

She holds her breath.



IN THE STREET BELOW HER OFFICE, THE HOT ROHINI WIND has picked up. Women and children scurry for shelter. A blanket of yellow dust whips across the temple stairs. The evening sky turns tiger orange.

Radha closes the window and sits in her dim office studying the

painting. Wind roars along the outside wall, pounding the shutters. In the blistering air, there is the faintest hint of moisture from the impending monsoon.

Down by the canal, the Tiger is waiting for the only person who will come out in this weather.

She loads her pistol, tucks a second clip in the waist of her sari, smooths her hair, and fastens her veil across her nose and mouth.

She hesitates, then leaves her mask hanging over her desk. A second face won't fool him this time.



WATER LAIPS THE MURKY BANK. PAH, PAH, PAH. But the sound is, really ...

Huh, huh, huh.

She cracks the smoking breach and shoves in another shell.

Is he wounded? Not wounded? Still on the bank? Not likely.

She turns a full circle in the water, still masked, watching back and front at once. Every time her heart slams in her chest, the rifle bobs.

A soft suck of mud. Behind her.

She turns to see his dark shape over dark water. The tiger hesitates, held for one second by her false eyes.

He leaps. Splayed into an almost human shape. She aims and yanks the trigger. The shot explodes next to her ear. He shudders in mid-air, clutching at his chest with both hands. She remembers falling and a mouth full of rank water. She remembers his cry of agony.



ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE MARKET SQUARE, BLOWING dirt has turned the low skyline of the village a dark sulfur color. Radha makes her way through the deserted market square. Crows shoot into the sky, shrieking at the sight of her. Beyond the last concrete wall is the canal. Yellow dust cakes the surface and blows over the black water in lurid swirls.

In the water, she can just make out the dusted shapes of flowers—stems of jasmine, and plum-colored lotus—blown up the narrow channel from the dead girl's house.

Radha takes a breath through her veil.

Tastes the drenching monsoon tank, thick with cat.

He is there, crouching in the shadows across the canal like he was when she was 12. Except this time she can see him clearly.

His dark body is striped with shades of burnt orange. His head wrapped in yellow patterned fabric, painted ochre over his eyelids and mustache. His cloth ears perk forward, twisted up with gold wire. The same tiger, the same tiger, she shot when she was a child.

He comes to the edge of the canal, hunkers over the water. Radha points the gun at him. "Don't move!" she shouts into the wind.

He draws his lips back to show his teeth.

"Rewati," he says, deep in his throat, "take away this veil."



THE BEATERS ARE CLOSER NOW, ALMOST IN SIGHT.

"I can be your faithful husband," said the tiger, "if that is what you desire."

Rewati is almost overcome by the young man's hidden beauty. She can hardly bear to think of this creature—tiger—man—or both, being killed. "Save yourself, then," she says. "Take off your skin and climb out of the trap."

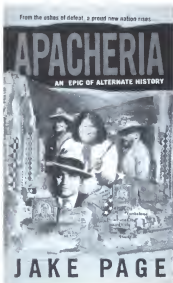
"I cannot," says the tiger, "unless you release me."

"Then you must trust me," says Rewati.

Continued on page 82

THE DEL REY INVESTIGATOR

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Can the strategy game market survive a flood of gold?

"OH, BACCHUS," KING MIDAS CRIED OUT IN HORROR. "REMOVE THIS DREADFUL GIFT." Sure, the King's daughter had just become a gilded statue and he had discovered that his diet was going to be spiced with a certain metallic tang, but he had also made a discovery at a deeper level. King Midas was suddenly and powerfully aware that you can get too much of a good thing.

Gold is valuable because gold is rare. It may seem that gold is everywhere, but it's actually quite difficult to find. All the gold ever mined would fit neatly in a cube the size of a baseball field. Granted, that's a pretty big cube, but when you consider that people have been clawing this stuff out of the ground and pulling it from streams since prehistory, that's not a heck of a lot to show for all that effort.

Other items that are both scarce and useful display similar values — platinum is pricey, though it lacks gold's cachet. Silver is more common but still quite valuable compared to base metals. Diamonds are... Well, diamonds are a special situation. The availability of diamonds on the market is strictly controlled by a small group of firms that keep a goodly portion of the supply securely locked away. The value of these little white rocks represents a triumph of effective public relations mixed with an iron-

fisted approach to distribution.

For a long time, the computer strategy game market labored under a scarcity not just of quality, but of games in general. Among that sparse crop, there were a few stand out titles. *Civilization* and *Master of Orion*, both distributed by Microprose, managed to offer a kind of restrained complexity. They wisely stepped back from perfect historical/scientific accuracy in favor of well balanced gameplay.

Both games were quite successful and spawned a generation of imitators. The original DOS-based *Civilization* and *Master of Orion* continue to stand as possibly the best turn-based strategy games ever constructed.

Note, however, that I didn't say they were the best strategy games ever. There's that little qualifier jammed in there — "turn-based." Turned-based games are played in a manner that's familiar to anyone who ever sat down to a hand of poker or an evening of *Monopoly*. It's a time-honored way of play, and until recently it was the only way of play. But now there's "real time."

Some elements of real time strategy go back to the early '80s with games like Ozark Softscape's wonderful *M.U.L.E.* But it took Blizzard's keen synthesis, *Warcraft*, to show the way to real time nirvana. When Blizzard released the even more spectacular *Warcraft II* and Westwood Studio piled on with the technowar winner *Command and Conquer*, a new subgenre was definitely in the offing.

Strategy gamers who were long exiled to the outskirts of computer gaming may look on this huge increase in titles as a good thing, but there's one big problem with all these new titles — too many of them are really, really good. Even worse, they're being innovative. The latest games from other studios are actually better than the original *Warcraft* and *C&C* series. They may even... wait, those sensitive to blasphemy should cover their ears. Okay, ready? They may even be better than *Civilization*.

Here's a run down of some of the latest real-time thinkfests to line the shelves.

Total Annihilation: Cavedog Entertainment

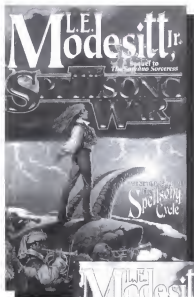
At first glance, it would be easy to dismiss *Total Annihilation* as just another of several *Command & Conquer*

BELOW: The cover art for Bungie's strategy game *Myth: The Fallen Lords*. RIGHT: 3DO's *Uprising* features nearly continuous action.



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clones. Take a second glance. Yes, *Total Annihilation* features a few units similar to those in C&C. Yes, it has something of the same "feel." But what really makes *Total Annihilation* stand out from the crowd is that it really stands out. That is, the world in *Total Annihilation* isn't flat. Neither is it limited to a shaded landscape constructed from a few tiles of various types.

Total Annihilation is played on a series of planets, each of which features an incredibly detailed, 3-D background. And this isn't just decoration. The terrain plays a huge role in tactics. The exposed layers of rock in some worlds was so realistic it makes me want to jump out of my tank and hunt for fossils.

Total Annihilation is not a C&C clone. This is one of the first true second-generation real time titles.

Uprising: 3DO Studios

While other studios are struggling to score on the field designed by Blizzard and Westwood, 3DO has taken the ball and marched off to a completely different game. *Uprising* doesn't play from a perspective view, or an overhead view. *Uprising* plays from a first person seat-of-the-pants view.

Uprising puts you in the driver's seat of a heap-big tank — a tank that's not only a weapon but a kind of rolling command center and construction tool. You steer your vehicle around a hilly, well-detailed landscape worthy of the best first-person shooters. At special sites you can construct citadels, power plants, factories, and an endless stream of military units to feed your growing army. And you fight. Oh boy, you fight.

Just watching a battle from the ring-side seat of your vehicle can be enthralling. Bombers lumber overhead, only to be decimated by SAM sites and anti-aircraft fire. Armored units charge the field. The resource management and technology expansion areas of *Uprising* are considerably smaller than in many real time strategy games, but the action is hot and nearly continuous.

As probably the most innovative of the lot, *Uprising* also has a few rough edges, including flaky internet play in the initial release. But the 3-D landscape is brilliantly rendered and the simple interface masks a wealth of strategy.

Age of Empires: Microsoft

I already devoted part of a column to this title a few months back. Months later, I'm still putting significant play time into this title. At its core the game borrows heavily from elements already established in classic titles, including *Civilization* and *Warcraft*. *Age of Empires* takes these features and buffs them to a high gleam. Combine with graphics that are jaw-dropping,

lengthy scenarios that simulate almost every major conflict of the ancient world, strong AI, great multiplayer options, and a feature list longer than the Mississippi. The result is a terrific gaming experience.

If you ever liked a strategy game, do yourself a favor and buy this one. It's not only a good game, it's an example of a game done right in almost every way.

Dark Reign: Activision

All right, not every game can be a revolution. Some are doomed to be simply good. *Dark Reign* doesn't drive the real time strategy flag forward. In fact, it doesn't really drive it anywhere — this is basically a variant on *Command & Conquer*. A good one.

If you've played *C&C* or *Warcraft II*, you'll feel right at home in *Dark Reign*. Start slapping a base together, secure your share of the limited resource (in this case, water), and begin cranking out your war machine.

There are some very nice units available to players, and some keen special effects to represent the destruction wrought by major weapons. Artillery plays a much larger role in this game than in others of the same ilk. As technology piles up, it becomes very hard to slide a unit into a base without taking a couple of artillery shells on the snout.

Dark Reign is at its best when played multiplayer, instead of facing the bafflingly uneven AI. Against human opponents you'll soon discover that the game provides plenty of room for innovative tactics.

Myth: The Fallen Lords; Bungie

Myth tosses away the resource management aspects of most real time strategy games and gets right down to the tactical combat. Don't draw from this the impression that this is a simple game.

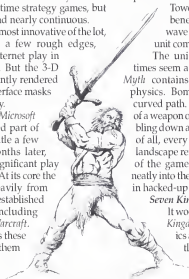
On this highly realistic landscape they've scattered dozens of innovative units, each of which is neatly animated and uniquely empowered. Dwarfs toss flaming bombs.

Towering giants crush other units beneath their heels. Berserkers wave their swords. *Myth* is a small unit commander's dream.

The units themselves may sometimes seem a little stiff, but the world of *Myth* contains some astoundingly real physics. Bombs and arrows follow a curved path. Units hit by the concussion of a weapon or explosion can be sent tumbling down a hill. Best (or at least goriest) of all, every bit of damage to men and landscape remains to be seen for the rest of the game. Fallen bodies don't fade neatly into the soil, they remain around — in hacked-up pieces.

Seven Kingdoms; Interactive Magic

It would be easy to dismiss *Seven Kingdoms* at a glance. The graphics are not nearly so polished as those in *Age of Empires*. The terrain is all but flat, offering only two levels of elevation. The technology tree is short. The



A character sketch for *Myth: The Fallen Lords*.

perspective seems forced. The number of units is limited.

And yet, more than any other game on the market, *Seven Kingdoms* captures the spirit and fun of games like *Civilization*. Even in a single-player game, *Seven Kingdoms* generates tension like no other title. At any time, an unfriendly alliance can swoop down on one of your towns, depriving you of income, materials, and people. Balancing economic demands, domestic politics, and relations with other rulers is enough to make you sweat.

Of all the games currently on the market, this one is simply the most playable. Hopefully, *Interactive Magic* will spin a dynasty of games from *Seven Kingdoms*. I know I'll be first in line for the sequel.

Sid Meier's Gettysburg; Finixis

As any reader of this column knows, *Civilization* really did hang the moon and the stars. And 30 years after I picked up a mangled lead slug from the battlefield at Chickamauga, my Civil War fever is undiminished. Combine the two, and this title seemed like a prescription I couldn't live without. The actual game is both less, and more, than I expected.

Rather than attempting to model the whole economic, political, and military mess that was the Civil War, Meier tightened his focus to that little town in Pennsylvania where the South tried to drive home their determination, and the North strove to smash Lee.

At first, this small scope was a disappointment, but once I got past yearning for ironclad battles off the Virginia coast, I saw indeed that what Meier and his crew had created was small — a small masterpiece. The battlefield and units have been modeled with a precision and design that brings to mind the best illustrations of the war. I went into this game sure that I knew everything about Gettysburg, and emerged knowing that Meier knew more.

Control of regiments, artillery brigades, and cavalry units is both simple and effective. Any student of the Civil War, even those who never gave a thought to gaming, should keep a copy of this game close at hand. The next time you scoff at Lee's brashness, or moan over the Union's seemingly endless inability to follow through on a victory, you get out there and try pushing muddy, tired men around. Packed with details and including a book on light arms tactics, this is the new high water mark in historical wargames.

There it is, the crop in the fields at the end of 1997. But what is a strategy gamer to do? When every oyster contains a nearly perfect pearl, how are we ever to pick that one pearl of great price and dismiss all the pretenders? The answer is: You can't! When the competition is so rife with riches, there's really only one choice — get them all. But don't leave your bank account looking like the Persian forces after *Marathon*. After all, *Shinra* and *Star Wars: Rebellion* are still on the way. ☛

MISSISSIPPI SNOW

Continued from page 64

it is safe to love this Yankee boy. Why do they need one more soldier? We are losing this fight, and that's the Lord's own truth. What could they need him for?

When he is feeling better, she lets him walk with her on the gallerie (on those occasions when it is cleared for the walking). After a time, she lets him hold her hand in the privacy and shade of the great live oak alley that leads up from the river to her plantation house. And just before she lets him kiss her, she tells him of how fine that house can be, when there aren't so many guests staying, and of the warm winter nights when you can peek through the trees and watch the stars coming out until they sprinkle the sky like grains of sugar sparkling on black velvet.

She's hoping maybe this soldier boy is different. Maybe, being from the North, he isn't all mixed up with pride and honor and courage, which are after all just a bunch of words that mean a man's fixing to get himself killed.

"Stay with me, Kay," she says when she is in his arms and knows he is thinking of nothing else.

He is considering it too. She is coolness in the furnace of summer, a refreshing breath of air to a man who has seen too much, has heard the drums beat Advance! once too often. What more does a man have to do? Hasn't he earned this sweet taste of cool Southern cream?

"Stay with me forever," she whispers and he is about to say, Yes, yes, forever, when a lieutenant of his jogs up to them, begs the major's pardon and hands over a leather saddle bag stuffed full of correspondence. Nothing official, mind, as they are on enemy ground, just personal letters that have finally caught up with the good major's whereabouts. They are from his sister Gerta telling him of home, reminding him of the Girls He Left Behind, his sisters and mother and favorite aunts. They speak about Fourth of July parades and of God and country.

Kay excuses himself, his brow creased under a considerable load of cogitation. She does not see him again for near about two days.

IN THE END, THE WORDS SPOKEN TO HER BY the hearts' ease in the Cadian's garden come to calling. She realizes that there is no need for a thaw. Death is a woman too — and much colder than any Mississippi snow. But the soldier boys love Lady Death more.

McKay Wesley O'Connor holds her in his arms one last time. He will be leaving directly. She can smell the damp wool of his coat, feel the heat of his breath on her frosted cheek. With her ear pressed against his chest, she hears the beating of his heart.

It is so very much like the sound of drums. ☛

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TIGER TIGER

Continued from page 76

MONSOON WIND COMES DOWN LIKE AN open hand, ripping at her clothes. It lifts the Tiger from the opposite bank, draws him up through the layers of heat and darkening dust, his arms spread, teeth white, claws out. Radha crouches in the dirt and shoots into the black cloud of him. Thunder splits the sky. Rain smacks into her eyes. She shoots until the gun is empty. She scrabbles in her clothes for the next clip, and shoots into the pummeling dark, until she realizes he is face down in the mud in front of her.

Orange paint is washing off his caramel-colored body. His cloth ears are wilting between twists of gold wire. She turns him over gingerly to see who he is.

Blood and splinters of bone slough down the middle of his face. There is nothing left to recognize.



The mayor of Palghat was pleased to announce the end of the crime wave. Radha's headline even topped the one about the arrival of the monsoon.

But that was hardly news.

Rain lashed the palms in the plaza, shaking them like green tassels. In the distance, the Vadakkunnathan temple was a white stucco blur. The street below had turned into a murky river, scummed over with leaves and bits of paper, and someone's laundry, blown down by the wind.

Radha watched the white gauze float by, curling and bunching in the flood. She'd had two calls so far this morning. One from the commissioner in Trivandrum, about a promotion and a considerable raise; one from the New Delhi paper, where a reporter had decided she was the most interesting thing since the discovery of rice.

Wealth. Fame. Two gifts from the Tiger.

She closed the shutters against the downpour and sat down at her desk. The painting of Rewati lay there in a nest of newspaper, face up by her tiger mask, both waiting to be packed.

So much easier in a fairy tale. The girl climbs down the tree, reaches through the net and strips away the sorcerer's false hide. The handsome young man steps out and the two live happily ever after. But she never takes her eyes off him, and he remains helpless under her gaze until the day he dies.

Radha folded paper over the painting, the newsprint damp from the thick air. For Rewati, the capture was frozen forever—the falling net, the tiger's trusting gaze, their ending a guarantee.

She glanced at the computer screen again and the old-style e-mail that had been waiting for her this morning.

Thank you, Rewati. ♡

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JUANITO

Continued from page 60

The quetzal bird sat upon his head, and he wore the cape of quetzal feathers and the goggles of shell and jade. Into his belt were tucked the magical pipes and the magical purse of gold. In his right hand he held the bone awl, and in his left, the lightning spear. He was a child no longer, but a strong, young man, and his skin was as blue as the god's.

"Are you Tlaloc, come to us again?" Toxillan asked.

Juanito nodded. "Tlaloc breathes again in our knees. Quetzalcoatl, and many others, for all the gods are one. Now you must know my true name, the name my father gave me. It is Cuauhtemoc."

Moteczuhzoma's heir! Toxillan and I fell to our knees. "My Lord!" I cried, and knocked my head against the ground, but Cuauhtemoc lifted us up.

"You must not kneel to me, for you are my brother, my kinswoman — as much the god as I." And I saw that the skin of my arm, and Toxillan's, was no less blue than Cuauhtemoc's. The king turned to Toxillan. "Huitzilopochtli, my brother — sun-god, war-god — will you return with me to Tenochtitlan and lead our people in battle against the invaders?"

He-Who-Had-Been-Toxillan smiled, and his face shone as the copper disk of the sun. "My brother, I think that you can lead them well yourself. I am of a mind to join the other explorers and visit our sister the Moon. I would see this wonder of her glory stayed in the sky. But if you have need of me, call, and I will come to you."

Then Cuauhtemoc turned to me and said, "And my sister Chalchihuitlicue — will you come with me to free our people? We will chase these hispanios from our land, and back across the sea to their homeland, and add new subjects to give us tribute."

I thought of how I would decorate the new Tenochtitlan. I thought of Tlaloc's skull, set atop the Great Pyramid, its sides covered with paintings of the defeat and conquest of the Castilians, and the flames of the temple fire dancing in its sockets. I nodded my assent. "It shall be as you desire, my brother. Together we will bring our people art and war, the twin paths of glory."

Huitzilopochtli embraced us and began his ascent into the sky. I spoke a word over the sheep and fowl of the sky-land, and they became very small. I gathered them gently into a bag, along with many treasures of the sky-house. We would bring gifts of food, herbbeasts, and cloth to the people, to make them strong for the struggle ahead.

And so Cuauhtemoc and I, who had climbed the magical bean plant with fear and trembling so many days before, descended to the earth again. We went out of that sky-place, and came to this place, my listeners. And now you must make the end to my story. ■

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EGYPTIAN

Continued from page 53

"River?" His face drooped a moment, then he smiled wanly. He looked around. He couldn't see it. He danced faster, moving past me in the circle.

The Prophet growled and shook himself.
Funk is the sweet voice — Funk the luminous cloud — all melodies an echo of that voice — all colors a suffusion from that light.

Stars shimmered in the distance. I saw what seemed like planets, the hot gas clouds of Venus, red dusty Mars.

Then I saw the dancer. He sailed down the river in a flatted boat with stylized eyes painted on the prow. I saw his silhouette first as he poled before yellow-white Jupiter, winding downriver toward us. He wore a white wrap around his waist, silver arm-bands, and a kind of coronet on his head. His arms and chest were powerful. His skin was dark and hairless, except for the wolf's hair beginning at the shoulders.

He seemed a long time coming. Everyone seemed to be waiting for him. I could hear only the drummer, the bass, and the back-up singers still singing, wailing long cries that never died.

The dancer poled into the reeds I had not seen rise up along the shore, behind the stage. His lupine eyes fixed on me. I faltered in the dance and fell out of the circle.

"Death is different than we had supposed," the Prophet said, "and luckier — that's what the poet once said — there is no death, only more life, and more life."

Looking up, I could see Desmond on-stage now, heading toward the Prophet. He was dressed all in black. A T-shirt tight over his muscled chest, sharp, creased pants, and unlaced combat boots. He shoved away one of the dancers who tried to pull him into the circle. She stumbled and fell. He pushed the Prophet from behind.

"Get off the stage, old man."

Desmond's face was contorted with frustration. The Prophet turned and reached out for him. The two men in the star-spangled robes and turbans pushed out of the dancers. Eric followed them, his arms out. Rat came onto the stage.

"No," the Prophet said to Eric and the turbaned men. "No," the Prophet said to Rat. No one moved.

"It's time to go," the Prophet said to his brother. "It's time to go home."

The Prophet boarded the boat, leading his brother by the hand. He didn't even turn to say goodbye to me, taking his place at the prow. Others, some of the dancers, began to board the boat. I wanted to go with them; the feeling was overwhelming, the river promised longing fulfilled, an ease, a forgetting, but also an oblivion. Many had got on but there was still room. I stepped forward. Someone touched my shoulder. I turned to find the tortoise beside me. I reached out to

him. The pads of his feet were surprisingly soft. His eyes, beneath a fierce gaze, were surprisingly sad.

"No," he said, "not you, not yet."

When I looked back, the boat had pushed off from shore. Already, the river seemed indistinct, the stars receding. I saw Eric in the back of the boat, smiling at me and nodding. I passed through the back of the stage, through the river that was now fading away. Desmond knelt on the stage. Clearly, he could see everything. Rat, bent over beside him, tried to get Desmond to his feet, but he wouldn't move.

I exited through a back door into open streets, where I wandered off by myself into the cool night air, from time to time looking up at the perfect silence of the stars.

CRUSHED ICE NEVER PLAYED AGAIN. I haven't seen Rat since. I saw Desmond only last week, nearly six years since the tour. He was on a street corner, dressed in a tight blue suit and a bow tie, handing out Black Muslim literature. He looked good, still intense but more at peace. He smiled as I shook his hand. I asked him about Rat. He said Rat produced local bands now. We agreed he was always the most talented of us. Desmond asked me about A.J. I told him he was traveling around the country on a motorcycle trying to get himself together. Desmond said he could understand that.

I told him I was on full scholarship at UCLA, as an anthropologist. I was only in Oakland for a couple of weeks before going on a dig, my second, down in South America. Some Mayan ruins had turtle temples, not exactly tortoises but they would do. Of course, when I had the opportunity and money, I planned to go to Egypt. My studies focused especially on the religion and culture of Ancient Egypt. I know now the name of the dancer. Sometimes I even guess at the name of the river.

I look for the tortoise always, but I haven't seen him since that night. I long to see the river again, and sometimes think my life since that night has only been a waiting for it. The Prophet waited a long time. I can wait a while.

I talked with Desmond for half an hour on the street corner, but he never mentioned what happened to him the last night of the tour. I don't talk about it much either. Who would understand? But I think about it all the time. For others there is only the present, only themselves. For me, I know, even if the people are long dead, the dreams of a culture live on, perhaps in ways we can never understand, perhaps only knowable to us changed and interpreted by our dreams, but undeniable and with purposes we can never guess, promises for which we can only long and wait.

In the meantime, I study my anthropology. When I next encounter the river, I want to be ready. Not just for the river, but for what lies beyond as well. ■

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haven't got the nerve), and a rat who has no name but is nevertheless one of my favorite characters because he persists in addressing Tag as "Shipmate" even as the naughty cat kills and eats him amid the brave creature's introductory and only scene.

But at least you do get a glimpse of the old dear — and then you have the satisfaction of knowing that eating him *does* make Tag very sick — and I'd say the rest of the *The Wild Road* is sufficient compensation for the tragic loss. Besides, it is a book and you can always turn back to pages 65 through 67 and there's that old brown rat all alive again, just as good as new.

Believe me, it works. I know it does because I've done it a number of times.

Gahan Wilson

The Gratitude of Kings, by Marion Zimmer Bradley; ROC, NY; 112 pp.; hardcover; \$14.95

We tend to think of a book as words on a page. But as publishers know, a book is not just words; it is a total "package." The book is a physical object of a specific size and shape, produced from certain materials, adorned with cover art and arranged inside according to a carefully constructed layout. Publishers try to create a package that both enhances the content and attracts customers. Sometimes an entire book's appeal comes from its packaging. We've all picked up beautifully crafted journals in a bookstore. We aren't responding to the content—journals are blank. It's the packaging that has drawn us in. I have a tiny hardcover book called *Quotable Women* that's about two inches on each side. Each page has a short quote by a famous woman along with some simple art. I bought this book not because of the great wisdom it imparted to me (a longer book of quotes could have taught me much more) but because the package was irresistible. There was simply a physical joy in paging through this tiny book. In this case, the package worked well to highlight the few bits of wisdom that made up the content. But in some cases a package overwhelms content, and in others it substitutes for content. So I approached Marion Zimmer Bradley's *The Gratitude of Kings* with mixed curiosity and caution.

The package is very appealing, a small 5 1/2 x 6 1/4 hardcover, only 112 pages long, with beautiful artwork by Neal McPheeters, stiff tan endpapers, and an elegant interior design on thick ivory stock. It's a book that you simply want to pick up and hold, that you can imagine savoring cuddled in an easy chair, that seems as if it could easily become a cherished treasure. But could an author actually write something in 112 pages that I would find well worth the \$14.95 price tag? Was this a case of an author writing something of an unconventional length and the

publisher coming up with an innovative way to bring it to the public? Or was this a case of an author and a publisher trying to "package up" (and cash in on) a short work that more appropriately belonged in an anthology?

I'm happy to say the truth is the former. At the end of *The Gratitude of Kings*, I felt I'd visited a fascinating world with depth and history, watched magic being used in fresh ways that gave me a new perspective, and grown close to a group of characters at a particularly interesting moment in their lives.

The story, seemingly, is a simple one. Lythande is summoned to the wedding of Prince Tashgan. Lythande is a centuries-old sorceress masquerading as a man. If her identity as a woman is ever discovered, she will lose all her powers. As readers, we latch onto this as the main plot. We believe that Lythande's identity will be revealed and she'll have to find some way to keep her magic. But we're wrong.

The Prince has summoned Lythande to be his champion in the Marriage Games, a contest in which two magicians compete to cre-

ate the most fantastic and beautiful illusions. Her opponent will be the Lady Mirwen, the bride's lady-in-waiting, who appears to have plans to take power in the kingdom. Now we think we've got the plot pegged. The climax of the story will be the big contest, during which Lythande will expose Mirwen's schemes and save the kingdom. Wrong again.

The Gratitude of Kings is actually quite a subversive book, setting up our expectations and then refusing to fulfill them. This makes the events that do occur oddly more resonant and powerful. The reader asks, "But what about that? And what about that?" To which Bradley calmly answers, "Those things aren't important. Those aren't what life is about. Look at this instead. And look at this." Thus, the story's quiet end becomes a memorable and haunting one, one that reveals to us something very important and very real.

And so the package reflects the work inside: a small, potent story that does not fit our "standard" expectations. Its power is much more concentrated.

Jeanne Cavelos

BOOKS TO WATCH FOR

The Chaos Balance, by

L.E. Modesitt, Jr. *The New Novel in the Saga of Reduce, a Tor Hardcover, \$25.95.* The fifth in the best-selling Reduce series. Lost colonies and legends in this gripping tale of magic and technology. Nylan, an engineer/smith, must leave a matriarchal society of angels and seek a life elsewhere,

though he is most responsible for their survival. An elaborate system of magic parallel to a system of technology is inherent in the Reduce books. Return to this disciplined and uncompromising world of fantasy with Nylan, his companion Ayrlyn, and his infant son. You will not be disappointed.

Icefalcon's Quest, by Barbara Hamby, a Del Rey Book, \$24.00. Young Prince Tir is kidnapped from the Keep. The bloodthirsty general Vair has plans to conquer the world—with a secret possessed only by this royal child. Icefalcon is the warrior who can save the child — and thus save the world. A valiant tale of traditional fantasy that will lead the reader to the forgotten Keep of the Shadow at the End of Time.

The Night Watch, by Sean Stewart, an Ace Hardcover, \$21.95. An alternate-history Earth set in the year 2074. Magic has enveloped the



world. Part parable and part epic, a distinctive book by the author of "*Resurrection Man*." Ghosts and gods, man-made machines, and deadly forests. A tale of mystery and the powers of life and legend. If you are a fan of the dark, the grim, and the beautiful — this tale is a must-read.

Dinosaur Summer, by Greg

Bear, Warner Aspect Hardcover, \$23.00. Here is a new work by the Hugo and Nebula Award-winning author of *Eon*. Set in 1947, an alternate-history where dinosaurs never became extinct. The world's last dinosaur circus must return its remaining survivors to the wilderness from whence they came, a plateau in South America. Peter Belzoni and his journalist father are at the heart of this adventure. Perils await them, and most of the natural world. A tremendous adventure filled with danger and imagination for all ages.

Twelve Impossible Things Before Breakfast, Stories by Jane Yolen, Harcourt Brace Children's Books, \$17.00.

Whimsical tales by the magical author, Jane Yolen, a "Realms of Fantasy" favorite. One of these stories, "Lost Girls" was featured in the previous issue of ROF. Preview that piece and you will know each and every story within her collection is just as wonderful.





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Contributors

BILL EAKIN SAYS THAT UNICORN STEW is his Redgunkish attempt at a unicorn tale. It is a completed story in its own right, but one that may evolve into the opening of a book. The book idea is not one about unicorns, but a fantasy that runs down from Redgunk into the subterranean underpinnings of a lot of myth, from unicorns to forgotten ithyphallic gods to unnameable Under-things.

David M. Sandner has recently had fiction published in *Pulphouse*, *Thirteenth Moon*, *Mythic Circle*, and an anthology, *Dragons*. His stories and poems have also been published in *Asimov's* (including the Brazilian edition), *Amazing Experiences* (including Best Poem of the Year, 1990), *Byline*, and *Gaslight*. He attended Clarion West in 1987 and won the 1988 Colwell Short Story Award. His scholarly book on fantastic literature, *The Fantastic Sublime: Romance and Transcendence in Nineteenth-Century Children's Fantasy Literature*, came out in November from Greenwood Press. A paper appeared in *Mythlore*. Upcoming papers will be appearing in *Extrapolations*, and *The Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*. His reviews have appeared in *SF Review* and *Thirteenth Moon*. David holds a Master's Degree in English Literature from San Francisco State and is currently a PhD student at the University of Oregon.

Carrie Richerson began writing science fiction, fantasy, and horror stories at the beginning of the decade, and now finds herself protesting "You mean I have to keep doing this into the next millennium?" Her work has appeared in *Fantasy and Science Fiction*, *Amazing Stories*, *Pulphouse*, and *Phobias 2*. She has a story forthcoming in *Gothic Ghosts*. Carrie lives in Austin, Texas with her blue-eyed wonderdog, Jeep, and four tyrannical cats.

Severna A. Park is the author of two novels, *Speaking Dreams* (1997, AvoNova) and *Hand of Prophecy*, (forthcoming in hardback, February 1998 from Avon's new SF imprint, AvoEos). *Speaking Dreams* was previously published by Firebrand Books and was nominated for the 1992 Lambda Literary Award for Science Fiction. Her short story, *The Golem*, was recently accepted by Ellen Datlow and Terri Windling for their anthology *Black Heart, Ivory Bones* (to be released in 1999). Severna's short stories, *The Island of Varos*, and *Birthmothers* are both upcoming in the online magazine, *Tomorrow SF.com*. She also lectures regularly on Women in Science Fiction for the Women's Studies Department at the University of Maryland, and has contributed articles to the program's *Science Fiction and Fantasy Feminist Newsletter*. She has been a regular reviewer for *Tangent* magazine, and *Lambda Book Report*. Severna lives



Bill Eakin

with her lover of fifteen years in Frederick, Maryland, with two darling cats, and is presently at work on a really big book about the end of violence.

Deborah Therese D'Onofrio attended Clarion in 1995. Born and raised in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, she did time in the Midwest under the guise of receiving a BS and MS in Microbiology. Cold weather chased her and her husband south to Texas where they currently reside in a residential community called "The Woodlands," 20 miles north of Houston. Coming from a first generation Hungarian family, married into an Italian one, she is now a naturalized southerner on account of being the mama of two native-born Texans. She is currently at work on a novel that reflects her first hand experience of blending these three cultural colures together.

Joel Naprsteck teaches painting at The Joe Kubert School of Graphic Art. He has worked as a freelance graphic illustrator for a number of years. His artwork has been published in *Science Fiction Age*, and he has recently completed two covers for DC Comics, *Batman* and *Superman*. His work can be seen in the current *Sci-Fi Invasion*, where he has a humorous Star Trek spot and a Godzilla parody. Joel has been concentrating on "Pulp Art," art with the lurid air and "hard-boiled" detail of a '30's pulp fiction jacket. He resides in Morris Plains, New Jersey and enjoyed illustrating Bill Eakin's *Unicorn Steew*.

Michael Gibbs is a freelance illustrator working in Alexandria, Virginia. His unique style combines traditional painting and digital media. Michael's work has appeared in *Realms of Fantasy* as well as many other magazines, publications, and books. He has received national and regional recognition for is work, including awards from the Society of Illustrators, *Communication Arts* magazine and others. He is also the proud father of a two-year old daughter. ♦

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